

MacBethany

The American Dream

Book One

Nicholas Grubbs

Content Warning

This book contains mature themes that some readers may find upsetting or triggering and thus may not be suitable for all readers.

These include but are not limited to: assault and violence, bullying, depression, anxiety, self-harm, panic attacks and anxiety attacks, parental abuse, substance abuse, abusive relationships, homophobia, revenge porn, sexual assault, and suicide.

Reader discretion is advised.

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To my family - thank you for being there.

To my friends - thank you for putting up with me.

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To Norm Macdonald - thank you for “The Moth Joke”

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AMBITIONS

Beth

Screaming. Cheering. Blood. Concussions. Broken noses. Heroes and villains. Underdogs and franchises. Davids and Goliaths.

It was a tale as old as time. Or at least as old as the tradition itself, which began around 1987. The annual “Beginning of the Year Dodgeball Game” was an integral part of the Arlington City High mythos. I did not choose the name and “The ThunderDome” was trademarked, to the chagrin of the sweaty seventeen year olds of yesteryear who wanted to make it a paid event. Thankfully they did not succeed in this pipedream or else we would be forced to cram hundreds of middle-aged onlookers in our already compacted gym.

The dodgeball game, much like the parties thrown during the final days of August, marked the beginning of the school year. Joy and drunken bliss for sweating inside classrooms for eight hours a day, five days a week. It was not a tradeoff I wanted to make.

Nevertheless, it was quite nice to see some of the arrogant little freshmen get put in their place. As was tradition dating back to the days of Ronald Reagan and the dawn of the Dallas Cowboys Dynasty of the 1990’s, something the locals clung to like the local drunk with the last bottle of whiskey in the county despite thirty years of subsequent irrelevance, the “Senior vs. Freshmen” game was the highlight of the festivities. It was the final game before the championship round, and the Seniors had a policy: take no prisoners. They were the Spartans of Ancient Greece. Any poor child who stood in their way was swept aside like crinkled brown leaves before the leaf blower.

Incoming students with older siblings who attended ACH had the knowledge ahead of time that their fates were sealed if they tried to step out of line and volunteer to play with the dream of achieving personal glory. This brief foresight saved many a child from many a brain bleed. For the unlucky who did not have siblings, did not have parents as teachers, or moved from out of town, it was the biggest mistake of their high school lives.

I sat on the old wooden bleachers, the dry summer air beating down on me. Arlington had a student body numbering around... 2,200? 23? I had not heard the official number yet. Regardless of the number, the school’s athletic program sits firmly in the 6A conference, the most prestigious conference in a state overflowing with pizza-faced would-be Peyton Mannings. Rumors of a 7A conference swirl every year as more and more students flock to the largest public high schools. With the city of Arlington as our feeder city, our school is well positioned to be a powerhouse of a school for years to come. Rumors swirled that our school’s attendance would reach 2,800 by the time the current Freshman class graduated.

I, meanwhile, could not give a shit if we had 22,000.

Sitting on those uncomfortable seats in the gross very-much-still-summer heat was unbearable, especially with the body heat of two thousand people surrounding you. Suffocating you. The gym did not have good air conditioning, though it was said to be coming sometime during our senior year during a massive remodeling program the administration intended to undertake. The seats themselves were coated in a plastic covering that stuck to your ass if you

wore too short shorts and hurt your lower back to sit on. The fans installed high above were sadly not running on full blast. What air did get blown around from them was forgettable, much like the people beneath them.

I felt trapped by the people around me, their sweaty bodies brushing up against me when I tried to stretch out from the compacted ball I was forced to sit in. It was sickening.

Lauren was the only one whose body heat I could tolerate. I sat at her right hand, the spot where I belonged. She always let me sit at the end of a row if we were able to get those seats. I preferred to sit in the seats closer to the aisles, citing personal anxiety with large crowds and tight spaces and a desire to beat a hasty retreat if it became too unbearable. Most people may not care for anyone with mental health issues, but they will care when the anxious girl has a panic attack and starts vomiting all over the new shoes they just bought with Daddy's credit card.

But really, I just wanted an excuse to get out of these dumb assemblies if I grew bored of them. Which was most of the time.

The Freshmen took the court, twelve little lambs headed to the slaughter. My Juniors had won their first two matchups and secured first place. If the Freshmen pulled off an upset win, they would tie for the second spot in the championship game with the Sophomores. Ties were resolved by multiple coin flips. I would let the little shits fight for their win if I were running the competition.

I could hear the crowds growing restless, ready for what was to come.

From our position near the top of the bleachers, we had a grand view of the festivities below. The Seniors got the special seating atop the stage because, say it with me, it was tradition. The rest of us were in the pullout bleachers. I always wondered if someone had ever fallen through at some point during the years. They pull out far enough for people to hide under and smoke or drink during sporting events. It was an open secret that Isabella Montoya and Gavin Reth had less than family friendly activities under these fabled slabs of wood and plastic two years back as Freshmen. They have since broken up. I had them in my Geometry class last year. It was awkward to see them together after learning of their dirty not-so-secret.

The more preppy students took their places at the bottom of the bleachers. Why they willingly chose to sit down there, I do not know. Were they trying to get a high-five?

Katherine Duvall sat front and center in the bottom row, happily cheering on her classmates as they fought to get us free food. She was easily the smartest and somehow equally most clueless girl I have ever met. I can't bring myself to be cruel to her, though. She was one of the first and only people who were nice to me when I first moved to Arlington.

All in all, she really was a sweet girl. I was going to need people like her.

Behind the preps were the middle-of-the-roaders. The people who just wanted to fit in. Some were in clubs, others were on sports teams. They would graduate with a 3.2 GPA and enough extracurriculars to get into bigger schools like TCU, Texas Tech, or A&M if they knew the right people. More likely they will go to Abilene Christian or University of Austin or maybe Rice or just settle for community and have a kid or three by age twenty-five.

The lucky ones will be able to get out of the state and escape the umbrella of parents, obligations, and rules back home. The lucky ones would leave and never look back. I envied them. You cannot and would not be trapped in the hell that is the middle if you knew the right people. The football program proved that time and again. Tom Jimenez and Jason Whatshisface would be nothing without the team. I have seen Tom cheat off of Casey Harper so many times, it pains me. And she is as dumb as a fence post. But he calls her smart and buys her dinner and acts like she is the second coming of Einstein. All for the hope of a handjob in his dad's car and a C- on his History test. Hormones are a helluva drug.

The real magic happened in the rows behind these gentle souls. The more popular kids took their places towards the top of the bleachers, overseeing their subjects. Anyone who says high school does not *really matter* is wrong. Dead wrong. They are wrong because they are still in denial that they could not sit in the luxury seats when they were in school. Just like the Bowling For Soup song says: "High School Never Ends."

People hold the memories from these few years for the rest of their lives and they are shaped into the people they become during this time. Some people change, but the people who are "It" in high school are guaranteed one of two lives: Total burnout who peaks at age eighteen and are stuck in menial jobs for the rest of their lives or shining stars who excel at life and have everything handed to them and never grow as people, forever trapped in the mindset of a sixteen year old while inhabiting the body of a thirty-five year old. A perspective popular can get ahead for a number of reasons. Their looks, their charm, their family, their friends. Any of these fine qualities or lucky breaks can place you in the upper echelon of the high school hierarchy.

I was different. I earned this spot among the elites. Kicking and screaming, I earned this spot and I was never looking back.

In terms of popularity, admittedly, I am a no one. I know this. I was forced to move halfway across the country at age fourteen. Nobody knows me. I doubt ninety percent of the school knows that I exist a full year after I got here. Hell, most of them did not even know my name and made no effort to learn it. The ones who did try to learn it more often than not forget it within an hour of those godforsaken ice breakers we are forced to partake in every single first day of every single class. I loathed the thought of those wastes of time continuing in college.

With regards to all the other qualities and luck breaks, I am also lacking in nearly all categories.

My mother was a workaholic who was almost never home and had zero influence over anyone in the city. She's never even home so I had to fight my own battles for me if something happened. Thankfully I pride myself on my independence so this was a nonissue for me.

In terms of looks, I was nothing special. How I managed to get someone like Lauren fucking Bradshaw to give me the time of day is a mystery. There were girls that could take your breath away just by looking at you. Plus I was not one to doll myself up in an attempt to win the affection of boys. It was the exact opposite thing I wanted to do. I was told I am rather mousey. I knew what was conventionally attractive about me and I would not shy away from them. But I didn't do it for boys.

While I consider myself to be quick witted and rather smart, I will never get into Harvard Law. But why would I want to? Not everyone needs to be Elle Woods. Like Ted Knight once said, “The world needs ditch diggers, too.” I had no intention of being a ditch digger or a burger flipper or cleaning bedpans in a hospital, though, for obvious reasons.

I had known I was meant for a higher purpose for a long time. Some people are built for becoming chief of surgery, others for blowing their drug dealer for their next fix. There is a very large gap between these two groups of people. That was where I wanted to be. There is so much opportunity in this vast expanse of middle. Anyone that I planned to work with would optimally be inside this large gap as well. That was our base. They were how we would win.

I know for a fact I am destined for greater things, even if I am a nobody yet. I could accept that for the time being. I knew I was a nobody. Another face in the crowd. And I would not have it any other way.

What got me a seat at the table were my connections. Specifically Lauren. A shining city on a hill of a human being. A girl too perfect for words. My reason for living. We met early on in my time here at Arlington and never looked back. Friendship blossomed like a flower at a time when I needed it most. That flower became a garden when we shared our first kiss. That garden won an award in some magazine meant for forty year old soccer moms when we became an official couple. I will never forget that day when she kissed me for as long as we live.

I had forgotten what it was like to be so happy. I couldn’t even last two months before I allowed myself to desire again. I hate myself for that.

Of course we could never reveal our clandestine affair to the world. It didn’t matter what the current year is; we would be eaten alive out there! What would the PTA think if the captain of the girls’ volleyball team was shacking up with a nobody whose mother didn’t even attend the bi-weekly meetings?! The scandal would ruin the school! And a *girl*?! Our school would be ruined. Simply ruined.

Our secret attraction could wait in the wings for the time being. I had bigger plans for us than some dumb Homecoming Court all the other kids got to enjoy. Let them have their crowns and flowers and dresses. We could do all of that from the comfort of our own homes. No need for prying eyes or judgmental fools or hateful wretched pieces of shit.

I could see her from my seat, plain as day. The anti-me. As if on cue, we locked eyes the second I thought of Lauren. Like my brain waves projected out of my head and bounced around until she picked them up in her mind like some kind of dolphin from Hell.

Ashley Williams. Where the fuck do I start with this one?

Ashley

All she did for the entire assembly was stare at me. I know because I stared back at her the entire time just waiting for her to actually blink. She never took her eyes off of me. What was her problem? She's such a freak.

I missed the days when she was a mute. She never bothered me or the girls or anybody else. Kara and I made sure of that. Ever since they hooked up, all she's done is rub it in my face. All summer. All those pictures on Instagram and Snapchat stories of them hanging out together. I swear she would tag me in them if she could get away with it.

Is she really that bitter over last year? Just grow up and get over it. I did. I didn't have anything to do with what happened. That was all on Kara and we all know it. Why does she choose to take her anger out on me? It's bullshit. She's just jealous.

The funny thing is she shouldn't even be on my radar anymore. She's beneath me. Another pathetic wannabe who people like me should eat for breakfast. She wishes she could be like me. You'd think she would have gotten the hint last year, but she doesn't care. She's too stupid to realize that I'm going places and she's just another nobody.

When *she* glanced over at me, though, my eyes darted away as fast as humanly possible. I felt sick. If she thought I was staring at her the entire time, I knew I was fucked. We hadn't spoken in months. I still blame myself. It was my fault. She had no reason to ever speak to me again. Part of me hoped that would never happen and I would be miserable forever.

I deserved it. Fuck, I'm such a loser.

Beth

When Lauren glanced up at the stage, I thought my chest was going to explode. They stared at each other for far too long. I couldn't understand it. Fuck her. She's gone. You have me now. Leave her behind and never go back. How hard is that?

"Has... she been staring up here this whole time or...?"

I could barely hear her over the crowd. The Seniors were taking the court now. All around us, the built-up anticipation turned to a collective wave of energy ready to drown all the Freshmen before they could even memorize their locker combinations.

"I think she was looking at me," I said with as much arrogant confidence as I could muster. "I mean, look at me."

A smile. Good. Smiles are important. God, she has such beautiful lips. I never knew lips could actually be so attractive until hers were locked onto mine. A few years ago, I couldn't get a date to a middle school dance if I paid someone. Things changed since I moved. Now I have the coolest, hottest, most popular girl in the state wrapped around my finger. I wouldn't be where I am without her and vice versa.

If thirteen year old me could see into the future, she'd be disgusted with what she saw. The stranger I am now compared to the person that I used to be. A silhouette of the scared girl who let bastards like them push us around all last year. Never again. It's amazing what a summer with the cool kids can do to a person.

Katherine

As much as I hate playing it, I'd be a hypocrite if I said I didn't enjoy *watching* dodgeball. There's so much going on, so much excitement. People are always getting in on the action. I couldn't sit through a baseball game if my life depended on it. I went to a game with my dad and it was so slow. One half-inning lasted a solid half-hour. Who wants to watch that nearly two hundred times every single year, let alone *play it* while knowing the ball might not come your way for an hour at a time?

I felt bad for the Freshmen. It really wasn't fair to expect these kids to be able to go head-to-head with seventeen and eighteen year olds. Looking back, I'm so glad I didn't volunteer to play on my first day Freshman year. Tom got his teeth knocked out that year. Sometimes being shy has its advantages.

One of the Freshman guys got hit so hard, he fell and smacked his chin off the concrete. He got up and gave a thumbs up, but it looked bad. I wondered when the teachers would step in. Dodgeball is getting banned across the country because it's so dangerous. There was even a PTA meeting over this issue a couple weeks before school started up again. My Mom was furious when they didn't remove it from the gym program. Just because this is "tradition" doesn't mean it can't be removed, or at the very least be changed.

A decade ago, this "tradition" was colloquially known as the yearly "Smear The Queer" game and every Freshman was collectively labeled with *that word* for gay people (and God, I hate even thinking that word, but it gets thrown around like confetti around here) by the upperclassmen before they could even walk in the front doors. After they got their beating, they got upgraded to the lowest common denominator. Fair game to everyone and anyone, not just the Seniors.

But did any of the Seniors ever get punished for pushing them into lockers and dumping them in dumpsters? Of course not. It took Grace Carlisle committing suicide for an enforcement of the generic lipservice "zero tolerance policy" that still had a thousand loopholes and special exceptions for the athletically gifted or monetarily privileged. And that was only last year. The news of her death still hurt to think about. She was really sweet.

If there was ever a "tradition" that could be changed here, I'm glad it was that. But we still have a long way to go.

God, why did I get so worked up over this? It's a *dodgeball game*. I needed to lighten up a little. I was hoping that maybe Junior year would be good for me. Maybe make some closer friends. At least *a* friend would be nice. I wondered if I should try joining a team to meet people. Girls' volleyball was still holding tryouts. Lauren might let me on the team if I begged.

From up on the stage, the Seniors savored watching the Freshmen getting pummeled. That was their special seating. Except half of them aren't even Seniors. I don't care where you sit, but I thought the precious "tradition" dictates that only Seniors can sit on the stage bleachers.

Just one more year and I'm up there. I wonder what they're really thinking.

Beth

The game went on for too long. The Freshmen had no business being that good. The Seniors clearly do not care, which I found to be very ironic because the first day back was usually the only day when Seniors really mentally show up. Getting to see the friends again who you neglected over the summer was always the highlight of any school year. After that, it was nearly two hundred days of schoolwork, homework, athletics, the school musical, and obligations.

Unless you are an overachiever who has ambitions of Ivy League or come from money and can coast on by for the rest of your life with your unhappy spouse and ungrateful kids, you are stuck in that undesirable part of the middle where I would never go. Ensnared to a future of student loans, children who will love you then hate you until they turn twenty-five then love you again, a marriage with more bumps than a country road, a midlife crisis or two, and a meaningless death with nothing to show for it.

I swore over the summer that this would not be my future. Not after what happened.

The Dodgeball Game usually drew the attention of the upperclassmen masses for one last hour, but this event seemed an exception to the rule. Four Freshmen remained out of seven with five Seniors opposing them. Previous classes were never this sloppy. According to Lauren, the worst the Seniors had performed in previous years was losing three people the whole game. Perhaps the football and basketball players feared injury this year? Pussies.

One poor child attempted to run forward and snatch a lone ball from the center of the court. Two of the higher ranking football players who did not fear injury and were likely the first to sign up for this game, Frank Newman and Tom Jimenez, pelted him when he slipped on the squeaky gym floor. One of the balls hit him in the testicles. It was a pathetic sight watching him writhe around in pain while the other Seniors pelted him over and over and over while the gym teacher half-assedly called for them to stop. Everyone laughed. I could empathize with that kid.

From atop the stage, the elite of the elites sat and laughed from the protection of their little mafia. Off to the side of the bleachers was the throne.

Yes, a throne.

A prop from the school's production of Hamilton the previous year, it was made of fine maple wood and decorated to look like an actual throne. Gold covering, a soft purple pillow, fake gems encrusted into the handles. I cannot help but admit the production department did a fine job of making the thing, even if it was only used in one scene in the actual show. It makes sense that the school would keep it after all the work that clearly went into constructing it.

I lost all interest in it when I saw the boy sitting in it.

Ashley

Yes, the throne was a bit much and it could be considered a waste of twenty bucks, but I'll never forget the look on Spencer's face when he brought it back from the music room and proudly said he bought it from Ms. Jones, the director of the musical and the school's music teacher. Charles had been pushing for him to loosen up a little and this chair helped him do exactly that. I don't think he had ever been so happy in his whole life than the moment he got to sit down and act the part of the king.

Spencer wasn't like the other jocks around there. He was actually very sweet. He was kind and considerate. He was protective, but not overbearing in a way that it comes off as creepy or controlling or abusive. But what I loved most about him is how much he loved his sister. She's a sweetheart.

Our high school lives were very similar in some ways up until now.

I had just been named Head Cheerleader over the summer between Sophomore and Junior year, something that pissed off some of the Seniors like Stacey and Elena more than anything. Did they deserve it based on their age? Absolutely. Did I earn it from years of cheerleading camps and team building projects I organized with the other girls? You're fucking right I did. I *earned this* and I could give a shit that the older girls started spreading rumors about me as soon as they got passed over. Call me an anorexic to the other girls all you want, Brooke. It's not going to make me quit.

And yes, being a best friend and protege to Kara Alderman all but ensured I would be given the role of her successor after her graduation. Regardless of the politics behind my election, I was still Head Cheerleader. That means *something* around that school.

Spencer had been the starting quarterback since our Sophomore year. Like myself, he earned it. He didn't do so well during his first few games, but he really came into his own by the end of the season. I was at every game and it was very fascinating watching him go from lanky and insecure mess to being the stereotypical quarterback. A real leader. If the Freshman version of himself could see what he would become in just two years, he probably wouldn't believe it. The acne, the braces, the kinda dopey demeanor. It's amazing what some skincare and muscles can do to a boy. He was still every bit the socially awkward goof, though.

He asked me out on the fourth of June at the big "End of the Year Party" that was thrown every year by the new Captain of the Football Team. So in this case, since Charles was long gone, Spencer. Being the kinda awkward guy he was, he joked that we would have our first official anniversary dinner on the Fourth of July and it would be all American themed. I wasn't ready to start dating again by any means, but it was expected of me. So I put on a smile and accepted that I was having a USA themed anniversary dinner under the fireworks.

We went on a few dates because we were expected to. The Captain of the Football Team and the Head Cheerleader. We were destined to date, lose our virginities to each other, break up, hook up, garner a lot of drama about whether we would get back together, become Homecoming

and Prom King and Queen, and probably break up after we meet other people that we are more compatible with in our respective colleges located a few hundred miles apart.

It's just how it is. It's what was expected of us. You can't be at the top of the totem pole and not have other people project themselves and their expectations on you and your lives. We were high school royalty. I accepted that was going to be the baggage that came with popularity.

But Spencer was different. I could tell after our third date. He drove me back to his place after dinner. I was expecting this was the night we'd end up hooking up, even though I didn't want to at all. I guess I just kind of resigned myself to knowing it was going to happen sooner or later and prepared myself for it.

He brought me inside and, to my surprise, introduced me to his sister Megan. She was bragging about making it to eighth grade and I decided to humor her a little and say she's basically in high school already. The way some of the teachers treat Freshmen, she could have started in August and skipped the formality that was her final year of grade school. For some reason, she seemed to really admire this, even if it was just an awkward way of boosting her spirits. I guess I made her feel... older, I guess?

For the rest of the night, the three of us just talked and watched a movie (Point Break. One of Spencer's favorites, to no one's shock.) and Spencer made us burgers since Megan hadn't eaten yet. He is surprisingly well versed on the grill.

When he was outside, Megan started whispering to me. "He's never brought a girl home before," she said with a bit of a grin that revealed a set of braces that she would have taken off by the end of the summer.

I wasn't exactly surprised, but come on he was the starting quarterback. How did he make it through a year with Charles as his wingman and not get laid?

"Is that a good sign?" I asked kind of jokingly but also curious as to whether she knew anything I didn't about her brother and his experience with girls.

She glanced at the back door to see if he was there before she spoke again. "I think he really likes you. And you seem really cool."

I wish I could say something like *I'm not surprised* and see if she would laugh along with me, but I was at a loss for words. I'd dated before, sure, but never had someone's sibling tell me anything like that. I never had a sibling before. Being an only child made me wonder what it would be like to have someone around all the time. I remember asking Spencer about it once. He said even though she's a smartass, she's really going places. I couldn't disagree with him.

"Oh. Well thank you. You're really cool, too, Meg." I didn't know how else to respond.

For whatever reason, be it childhood innocence or a psychological desire to have an older female figure in her life after the loss of their mother at such a young age, she smiled as wide as she could and blushed like some pretty boy celebrity like Harry Styles had just called her pretty in front of thousands of other jealous tweens. We talked uninterrupted for the next hour. Megan basically shooed Spencer away when he tried to eat with us.

From that moment on, I felt like I'd gained a sister.

Spencer didn't try anything with me until our one month anniversary. He was very clumsy, but sweet and considerate about it. I got to check off another box from our "High School Sweethearts" list that afternoon. I still remember how much it hurt. He wasn't my "first," though. Not really.

I sat here watching him on this throne a couple months later and I wondered what happened to him. He had grown a bit of an ego, which is honestly an understatement. He was becoming kind of a dick. I think he was trying to do it to impress his friends now that they were entering the world of being upperclassmen. Apparently this transition meant they must "act older" and this translates to being assholes to everyone around them. He also bragged about our relationship to anyone who would listen. There's a *big* difference between admiring your girlfriend and proudly proclaiming to the world she's with you and you love her... and showing me off like I'm the car you bought with your summer job money.

I'm hot, but I'm not a car or a laptop or a signed baseball. I'm a person. I have feelings.

As the summer went on, he seemed to be spending more time with the guys than he did with me or Megan. The two of us would spend a day together every other week while Spencer was "chilling with the guys," to quote Spencer when he got home around midnight while I watched his little sister. I'm not saying he can't spend time with his friends, and God knows I didn't exactly want to have sex all day with him, but Jesus Christ you don't need to spend every waking minute with them.

First thing's first, I knew he wasn't cheating on me, even though there was a good theory there: *Guy spends less time with girlfriend, says he is spending time with close friends and teammates who would cover him regardless of what he was really doing, I end up finding out when he gets lazy, which let's face it he would be dumb enough to get caught, and expose him as a filthy liar in front of the whole school.*

I know he wouldn't cheat on me. I'm me. He'd be the biggest idiot alive.

Call me vain, call me entitled, call me a bitch, call me whatever. You'd be right. I know me. I know who I am. I've lived with it for nearly seventeen years now. I was blessed with a near-photographic memory, good looks, and the ability to never forget someone's name, especially the people in the movie and television business. No matter what I do to myself or put in my body, I will remember everything I have ever done. It's my cross to bear. My blessing and my curse. I know exactly who and what I am.

But there he is, sitting on that fucking throne that has become a symbol of his pretentiousness, and I keep asking myself what happened to him. And what happened to me. And to her. And to us.

The longer it went on, the more I wondered when that stupid game was finally going to end.

Beth

Just when I was about to write the Freshmen off, another surprise. Tyler (I thought his name was Tyler?) was one of the last three Freshmen to remain in the game. Frank had rallied his little band of brothers and systematically crushed the other Freshmen one after the other. One of the Freshmen, a boy with frizzy red hair, managed to get one of Frank's people out with a throw to the feet that managed to bounce out of reach of the upperclassmen. It drew a loud cheer of support from the ginger's colleagues on the bench.

Big mistake.

The Seniors charged the center of the court and bombarded the boy until he fell to the ground. When he was down, they continued to batter him until he cried. The faculty did nothing. I caught the slightest hint of a smirk from the mouth of Ms. Kendall, the Biology teacher whose open disdain for Freshmen evaporated when they were promoted to the rank of Sophomore.

While the Seniors were bouncing around and beating their chests like silverback gorillas, Tyler and his remaining two companions sprang to life. They rushed forward and easily eliminated two of the Seniors, leaving only Tom and one other boy I do not recognize remaining.

Nothing made me happier than watching Frank walk up the stage stairs, head hanging in defeat, while the Seniors mocked and jeered at him for losing to a *Freshman* of all people. Even Spencer was busting his balls over it and made him sit on the floor instead of the seat at his right hand he usually occupied.

In the shock of the century, Tyler eliminated the last Senior and Mr. O'Reilly, our beloved Principal, had to run onto the court and prevent the Seniors from throwing trash at the losing team. The Freshmen were elated over their upset win. They deserved it. That Tyler kid was a hero.

That was when it dawned on me that half the "Seniors" on the stage were not even Seniors. Frank Newman was a Junior. Spencer, too. God knows Spencer Barnett and Frank Newman were not smart enough to skip a grade. And the other people around Spencer were all Juniors, too. Casey Harper and Heather Sinclair, two of Ashley's enablers she was forced to call her friends. Ashley herself was a half a year older than I was.

Christ, was *anyone* up there actually a Senior?

I should not be shocked that the most elite of the student body have taken up the stage. It was prime real estate around here. Sitting high above the rest of the school, in full view of everyone. Even so, you would think that the administration would want to keep the grades separated for whatever reasons they give. They do love their innocuous rules.

But will anyone say anything? Of course not. They are the elites. The top one percent. If anyone tries to stop them, they will be ridiculed. What will the faculty do? Offend their star quarterback? That would go over swimmingly when he decides to enroll at St. Mary's for his Senior year and win their very weak 2A-Conference with ease and *still* make it into Alabama or Oklahoma or LSU or Penn State as a true freshman starting quarterback.

Imagine being the Principal to lose the top high school quarterback in the state because of semantics like punishing your student. O'Reilly could kiss his job goodbye.

With only a year left to go, Spencer could pretty much do whatever he wanted. Same with Frank, who served as his right-hand-man and Assistant Captain despite his failure on the dodgeball court. From what I have learned, these two have been inseparable since they were in pre-school. This friendship now leads to the second most powerful coupling in the school, behind only Spencer and Ashley. They rule firmly, but fairly, and everyone knows their place when those two assholes were around. No one would dare step out of line and rock the boat. What can anyone do even if they wanted to speak up against their overlords?

They are the elites. They make the rules. Who would dare stand in their way?

Katherine

My mom always said I had the makings of a leader. I brushed that thought off as soon as she said it, chalking it up to a loving mother trying in vain to encourage her introverted daughter. I'm just... not. I'm not popular or have popular friends that get me into parties and stuff. I'm shy to a depressing degree. I'd *like* to be popular some day, but not to the levels of Spencer or Ashley. I don't need a crowd of on-lookers and yes-men who just tell me what I want to hear and laugh at my jokes and buy my food. I want people who love me for me.

I already have my sights set high, though. I plan on going to law school and becoming a defense attorney. I know that's really hypocritical to say after I just bashed myself for saying I'm shy and scared of human interaction, but I want to *help people* more than anything in the world. When I get going on something, I won't stop. My guidance counselor said I just needed more confidence. For better or worse, I agreed with her. I needed a change if I wanted to actually make something of my life.

And I thought becoming Student Council President was exactly what I needed.

When Mr. O'Reilly finally got the upperclassmen to stop throwing trash at the Freshmen, he got booed. After shutting them up, he made the announcement that the annual elections were coming up.

I felt my heart skip a beat. My blood boiled for the chance to get involved around here. I've never really spoken to Spencer outside of interactions in class so I feel bad saying it, but he just wasn't going to do the job properly. Being President should mean sticking up for the little people. People like me. The ones who aren't athletically gifted and don't have people waiting on your hand and foot for the opportunity to be seen with you at a party.

This makes me sound very petty, I know, but it's something I feel strongly about.

American politics is dominated by people who just want to serve themselves. Ever since I really started to pay attention to the news and hearing what's going on from people on Twitter, I've gotten to hear about how bad things really are for people out there. The reality of just how bad things suck around this country. The news doesn't care because they just want to pop a rating. The poor and downtrodden can suffer if it means making a buck.

Those are the people I would want to stand up for after I become a lawyer. I've put real thought into running for office one day when I'm older. I don't want the money that I'd get from backing the big corporations. I know I can make it on a modest living. I don't have some grand life goals to make X amount of money by age thirty or be married and have a kid by thirty-five. Give me a house on the coast and a strong position in a law firm and I'll live a good life. Anything else is a happy extra.

I know this makes me sound pretentious and probably extremely naive, but I do care. A lot. And student council was the first step on the lifepath that I wanted to build for myself. If that means going toe-to-toe with people like Spencer and Ashley, then so be it.

Beth

While some people consider Student Body President to be nothing more than a ceremonial role, it does wield its own modicum of power. Deciding dance themes, organizing fundraisers, lots of stuff that goes under the radar to the average high school student. It looks good on a college application as well, though that is not why I have a vested interest in the position. My dreams for the job are more altruistic than anything.

Being a real leader requires qualities I believe quite strongly that almost none of these people I sweat alongside with in this gymnasium hold. Courage, fearlessness, the mental fortitude to stand up for what is right, not being enabled by hundreds of sycophants who like you based entirely on your athletic prowess and ability to throw post-game keggers to celebrate wins over schools that stand no chance of beating you.

Did I neglect to mention that along with being the star athletes of the school, Spencer is also the presumptive Student Body President, with Frank Newman as his Vice?

Also, as expected, the Juniors won the dodgeball game. The luck of the Freshmen ran out, but heroes were made and the caste system continued with the ascension of Tyler Whateverthefuck to superstardom for throwing a rubber ball at someone three years his elder.

I should be grateful for the actions of a handful of people since we get a pizza day, compliments of the Arlington School District, but I had no intentions of partaking. Pizza is greasy and gives you zits. Besides, I have bigger fish to fry than worrying about thanking some people for free grease and carbs.

Victoria got the last out for our class. I made a note of that.

Spencer and Frank have not technically been “elected” yet, but they were all but given the positions at the end of the previous year. Before Spencer was named as the formal “Captain of the Football Team,” the previous captain, Charles Bruxton, left amid a scandal which rocked the school. Charles had all but taken Spencer under his disgraced wing and taught him how to be a leader and how to be a man. If he ends up anything like Charles, God help us all. But the damage was done before Charles was. He propped Spencer up as the future leader of the student body following what was meant to be Charles’ graduation and successful college football career as the new face of USC football. Go Trojans. This did not pan out. Shame what happened to him.

The thought of those two balls of wet clay that share a single brain cell between themselves being in control of the entire school makes me physically ill. How far has this school truly fallen? Not as if it was great to begin with. It really is a cesspit.

As Mr. O’Reilly, the real head cheerleader of this school, took the microphone stand and did audio checks, I couldn’t help but think of Lauren’s future. With her as the perfect candidate and myself as her campaign manager and girlfriend-extraordinaire, there was no way we could lose. I won just by having her as my girlfriend.

See, running for Student Council President is a lot like a game of dodgeball. You can put yourself out there like that poor redhead schmuck that rushed the center of the court and, as a result, had his balls explode and now has to endure a second puberty. Try to get noticed by taking

big risks and acting impulsively. Or you can group up and destroy anything in your path, looking like a bulldozer as you go, and getting all eyes on you, for better or for worse.

Or you can be like that Tyler kid. He knows how it is done. Wait in the shadows for the perfect moment to strike while nobody is watching. And by then, it is too late.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen, calm down,” O’Reilly began, his gravelly voice cutting through the collective noise of the crowd of students surrounding him on all sides. “Before we dismiss for the day, we have an announcement regarding the Student Council Elections. As you are aware, we will be holding our yearly student council elections in the upcoming weeks.”

Jesus Christ, don’t tease me, just get to the point already.

“Due to the graduation of Xavier Brendel this past May, there is currently a vacancy in the position of Student Body President. As it is only the first day of classes, no one declared to be running, though I expect that issue will be resolved by the end of the day.”

He flashed a knowing smile at the star quarterback, sitting atop his gem-encrusted throne. I half-expected them to just start macking on each other right there.

Xavier Brendel was Charles’ own little second in command that he had known since grade school. After Charles left the school in disgrace, Xavier was elevated to President. He lacked Charles’ spirit, though, and he proved to be a poor leader when his friend left the picture. If he’d just grown some fucking balls, he might have put a stop to what happened with Kara.

Then again, Charles was still around when Homecoming happened...

Spencer then quickly assumed the figurehead role at Arlington. Xavier did not protest.

“To anyone who wishes to run,” O’Reilly went on, “please contact Mr. Hardy in room 224 for information and the rules.” Mr. Thomas Hardy stood up and waved to the crowd. No one cared. “Alright, I know you all want to get out of here early. Everyone’s dismissed!”

With that, the gym erupted to life as the classes swarmed for the hallways in a cluster of wretched pieces of shit. If there was a fire marshal, he would be appalled at the recklessness of this retreat. A fire would result in hundreds of deaths, be it from the fire itself or the stampede of teenage bodies that would tear through these generic light brown wooden doors.

What a shame that would be to see these poor ingrates suffer.

Ashley

God knows I could give a shit about becoming President. It's too much work. Between classes, running the cheerleading squad, studying for SATs, driver's ed, it's all just too much. Organizing bake sales and dances and fundraising on top of everything else would be *waaaaaaay* too overwhelming for me.

Besides, Spencer wants it so badly he can probably taste it. It's really all he talked about whenever he bothered to spend time with me anymore. Even Megan was getting sick of it. I can't blame her. I don't know if he thought this was going to be some way to make more friends or get into college or what his deal is. It's just a dumb club. And besides, he was the Treasurer under Charles and his people last year. It's kind of funny how all of that worked out. He didn't even want to run for Student Council but when Charles made a push for the Presidency and said it would be good for Spencer to learn how to lead people, he ended up getting a spot without even running. It basically sums up Spencer's life in a nutshell: failing upwards. But in a good way. I still didn't get why he still wants to do it for real this time around. It's not exactly some big mysterious new adventure he gets to go on. He knows it's going to be a lot of work.

Still, if it makes him happy...

Our coalition formed ranks around the king of the school. Frank and myself stood at Spencer's flanks. Casey and Heather walked behind me. Tom, Jason, and the rest of the football players behind Spencer and Frank. Onlookers and wannabes trailed us at a distance. Our entourage stretched the length of two classrooms. I couldn't help but think of it being like the Secret Service trailing the President and his wife when they went out for public appearances. It made me feel constricted. It wasn't like this last year at all.

"Can you believe it's been a year already?" Frank asked as we exited the gym.

"Time flies, man," Spencer responded as he took my hand in his. He has a thing about holding my hand only when we're on dates or when we're around other people. Never when we're alone on the couch just relaxing.

"So what's the plan for running this year? Do you think there's any serious competition?"

That was when Spencer dropped a bomb on us I don't think anyone saw coming.

"I honestly don't even want to run this year."

The entire group stopped dead in their tracks. I heard a few people behind us grunt as they walked into each other, not expecting the heads of the pack to suddenly stop moving. Frank stared at Spencer like he had just told them he had cancer or something. This was *not* how things were done around here. The king of the school *does not* rock the boat like this. I was even upset to a degree because the bastard wouldn't shut up about it a few days ago. What changed?

"You're kidding right?" Frank was as confused as I was. They were like brothers. They told each other *everything*. How could this slip through the cracks?

"I uh... I don't know. I guess I just want to focus on the team, school, maybe find a job after the season ends, you know?"

I couldn't tell if he was just being coy or if he was serious here.

"I thought your dad was, like, totally loaded," Heather chimed in. She had a habit of stating the obvious that nobody wanted to bring up. Not a complete airhead, but not exactly "self-aware" at times.

"Don't get me wrong, he is," he assured us, "but I'd just like to be able to provide for myself and not rely on him all the time, you know?"

Frank wasn't convinced. "That won't be for a couple months though. You have plenty of time to be the King." He pointed up to the crown on Spencer's head.

How could I forget the fucking crown Frank got him as a joke. When he brought it out at Spencer's "End of Summer Bash" a couple days before school started, I was so embarrassed. More embarrassed for him than anything. Why would he do this? It's moronic. Anyone else in the entire school would be laughed at to their face. But Spencer gets a free pass because he's him.

Spencer took his crown off and studied it. Some Freshman I didn't recognize ran over and held up a pillow for him to place it on. I guess he must be someone's little brother. Spencer carefully put the crown on the pillow, as though it was the Crown Jewels of the Royal Family. The little Freshman bowed to his master and hurried away.

What the fuck is happening around here?

"I guess I'm just tired of being in charge. Quarterback, President, maybe Homecoming King—"

"Easily Homecoming King," Frank assured him as a grin began to grow.

"Oh you know it, man." He looked down at me. I guess he expected a kiss, but I was not in the mood now. He got the hint and looked away as quickly as possible. "But uh... I guess I just need a break, you know?"

I'd finally had enough of this crap. I still don't know if he was just screwing around or if he was being serious, but I was sick of being stuck in the middle. My head was swimming in this crowd of people. I had a present waiting inside my purse that was begging to be opened and I needed this to end so I could get away from all of... this. If he wants me to be a Jackie and just serve as eye candy and a status symbol, fine, I'll be the best fuckin' Jackie possible.

"Speaking of Homecoming King, you better have a kick-ass way of asking me this year."

I wasn't above raising my voice an octave higher and puffing out my chest so the boys do what I want. I've even caught Frank staring on occasion and he proudly stated he would never go after his friends' girlfriends or even exes. Nevertheless, if there was ever any way to shut this conversation down, it was to bat my eyelashes and change the subject myself.

"Of course I will, babe, you know that."

He has a cute dopey smile. It's one of the things that I still found endearing about him.

We kissed, though I was not even going to pretend to give it everything I had. Forget appearances, I needed a break from this nonsense. When I pulled away, the whole crowd was smiling at us like we were the Hollywood power-couple on the red carpet. I pressed myself tightly into his chest to give the people what they wanted.

I felt like a whore.

“We can talk more about it later, but we need to make a decision and talk to Hardy,” Frank told him. “So are you in?”

Spencer took a second. I could feel him stop breathing as he thought it over in his head. It was a weird quirk about him, like when Michael Jordan would stick his tongue out while playing. I don’t know if it makes him focus more or what, but I worry he’s going to pass out one of these times.

Eventually, he exhaled. It was more of a relenting sigh. “Alright, yeah, I’m in.”

Frank gave him a high-five and pulled him in for a hug. I got crushed between them. I couldn’t tell if it was part of the joke or if he genuinely forgot I had just been holding him. Either way, Frank reeked of body spray and I needed a shower now more than ever. More high fives between the football players and I found myself being dragged along to Hardy’s room.

Katherine

I knew exactly what I was up against when I overheard Frank and Spencer talking. Shouting was a better way to describe it, really. It's not like it was exactly a secret that Spencer would be running, but just getting the confirmation from the guys themselves made my stomach clench with anxiety. How could I get up on a stage and say I'm a better choice than the star quarterback? The team has been rumored to be contenders for the State Title all summer. If Spencer wins that, he'd be a high school football legend.

Who am I?

I maneuvered through the mass of bodies until I finally reached my locker. The Juniors were lucky enough to have lockers near the gym so I wouldn't need to wait for long before I got to leave. I hated the crowd and wanted nothing more than to just get outside and board the bus.

I almost fell over when Beth Hill ran into me. She was a skinny little thing, only about five-two, and I'm nearly a head taller than her. But she was walking with purpose and I thought I was going down when we collided. I could feel the people around us staring and my cheeks turned bright red. I hate being the center of attention.

"Ow, shit," Beth groaned. I could see her glare up at me, but it faded quickly. I could tell she felt as badly as I did. But for a second there, she looked like she wanted to stab me.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry, Beth!"

"No, you're fine," she muttered. "These idiots need to learn how to stay on one side of the hall."

Spencer's entourage took up the length of the hallway. Anyone who wasn't already in it either moved aside at the mere sight of the incoming horde or joined in as followers of the followers. Beth and I nearly got run over by some of the football players while we talked. We both glared at the back of their heads as they walked away, oblivious to what they almost did.

"Seriously though," I said while glaring at the jocks. "So what's going on? How was your summer?"

"Summer was good. Spent most of it relaxing or hanging out with Lauren. Really fun."

To put it bluntly, Beth and I weren't exactly "friends," per say. We talked sometimes during Sophomore year, but it was the same deal with Spencer with it only being a classroom friendship. I remember when she first came to Arlington. She was such a quiet girl. I felt bad for her. She really didn't seem to want to make friends, though. She clearly hated small talk.

Everyone knew she was best friends with Grace, though, and that put her in the crosshairs of people that didn't even know she existed until they caught them eating lunch together outside one day. Then Grace died and Beth just stopped talking to other people altogether for the last few weeks of school. Things got really good for her when she met Lauren, though. I can tell they're very close. She's probably the only person I ever see her really hanging out with anymore. They're basically inseparable.

“That sounds awesome,” I said with a smile. Even if we weren’t friends now doesn’t mean we couldn’t be later. Plus she *is* a potential voter... “I spent most of it hanging with friends and working at a little antique shop downtown.”

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around to find Lauren beaming at me.

“Kate! Ahh, it’s so nice to see you!”

We happily hugged one another. She smelled like vanilla. I asked her what kind of lotion she was wearing and where I could buy it because it was heavenly. She was the sweetest girl I’d ever met in my entire life and happily showed me the place and the exact brand on the website.

Beth

The first thing that I would need to do was actually convince Lauren to run for President. We had briefly discussed the idea in between rounds of a heavy makeout session at her place a few weeks prior. She was more concerned with spending quality time with me than worrying about the vast opportunities that this position could yield in her future, particularly for her college applications. Realizing there was no sense in pressing the matter even further, I gave up. I felt my protests would shut her out completely and we would be left in a situation where neither of us was satisfied.

I know this girl. I know how she thinks, how she reacts, how to convince her to listen to reason. While I was stuck as the now-third wheel in a conversation with Katherine Duvall I never intended to start to begin with, I could not help but steal glances at Lauren. It is unfortunately all I can do in this lifetime, but come graduation we would not need to fear anymore. We could be out together without fear of reprisal. Right now just wasn't a good time to become the openly gay "it couple" in school, especially in the wake of an election. It is not strategic. Who knows how people would react. And what do I look like? Harvey Milk?

How can I even begin to describe this girl to someone who hasn't met her?

Lauren Bradshaw. Lean. Blonde. An Aphrodite-incarnate. My muse. The most popular girl in our grade, save Ashley Williams, but that would not necessarily be hard to fix. She captains the volleyball team and *could* have been Head Cheerleader if she had spent all of Sophomore year sucking Kara Alderman's dick, but she decided to leave that job to Ashley. She also has aspirations for the Presidency, whether she will admit it or not. I promised her I would do anything for her the night we exchanged *I love yous*.

Helping her win Student Council President is child's play.

Lauren awkwardly rubbed her hands together. She always did this when she was nervous or embarrassed. "I don't really want to brag—"

"No, please, brag away!"

I wasn't sure how to feel about Katherine's insistence on hearing about Lauren's summer. Was she really this desperate for conversation?

"Well, I played a lot of volleyball aaaaand got looked at by scouts from the University of Texas!"

"What?! That's amazing! Are you going to commit there?"

"I'm still thinking about it," Lauren admitted. "I have all year to decide. Commitments don't start until next year. All I can do now is make a soft commit."

Just like our relationship... That was dumb and inappropriate. I apologize.

"Well if you end up going there, save me a seat," Katherine proudly commanded. "Ahh! I'm so happy for you!"

Katherine Duvall was a sweet girl. Very calm, very smart. Kind of like a celebrity's purse dog, except with much better hair and probably a better parent. Apparently she wants to become a lawyer and possibly run for office one day. That usually begins by winning an election here in

high school. Unfortunately for her, she would be going up against my Lauren to do it. I have no quarrel with her, but if she assumes she can beat my Lauren when the voting begins, I will snap her in half like the walking toothpick she is.

But until I was absolutely sure of her intentions, I was going to need to befriend her.

"I am as well," I chimed in with feigned interest. I was very happy for Lauren, that much is true. But the full truth is I just don't see this being a part of our future. I have much more grandiose ambitions for our future. And those do not involve the volleyball team after we gain their votes in the upcoming election. "She has such a bright future ahead of her."

Lauren smiled a little. A smile that only we understood.

Now for the kill.

"I still can't believe it's already our Junior year," I said casually. "I spent all summer thinking about how it's going to be around here when my best friend becomes President."

That was all I needed to see. The slightest hint of fear. The slightest quiver in Katherine's confidence. Her smile cracked like an icy lake. All it would take is pressing the issue and the entire sheet would collapse. But I do not need to crush her confidence completely. We could use a strong third party for now. Someone to rally the wannabes and failures that can relate to Katherine Duvall on a spiritual level. And when we no longer need her, she could be a powerful ally that we can easily manipulate.

She will serve for now.

"Oh, did you plan on running?" Kathrine asked, her attempt at hiding her disappointment going expectedly poorly.

"Well, ha, um... I mean, I thought about it and all my friends say I should, but I'm still on the fence about it for now." Again, she was rubbing her hands together. She will need to work on that. It is extremely obvious.

"You would be a fantastic President," I assured her. "Don't you agree, Katherine?"

"Oh, yea-yeah, absolutely." Katherine's disappointment gave way to friendly support. "You're such a sweet person, you totally deserve it!"

Lauren smiled and gave Katherine's hand a squeeze. "Aww, Kate! That's so sweet of you! Thank you so much! I'll definitely think about it."

Katherine gave her the weakest smile I have ever seen in my life. Despite my anxieties of this blowing up in my face, this conversation proved to be fruitful after all.

"Well I guess I had better get going," Kate said as she was already walking away. "Don't want to miss my bus." She gave a little chuckle.

"Bye, Kate!"

I admired Lauren's enthusiasm to become everyone's friend. It was a trait I did not possess. Not that I am physically unable to be friendly with others. Speaking to people and learning how they operate is one of my favorite pastimes. I just choose to not waste what precious time I have on this Earth engaging with people I do not believe worthy of my time. We only live for so long. Why waste it with ignorance and stupidity?

Katherine

Getting the news that Lauren Bradshaw of all people was going to be running for President was an arrow straight through the heart.

There's always a chance I could have gone one-on-one against Spencer, slim as it might be, but against Lauren, too? Lauren is pretty and popular and pretty much everyone loves her. There's no way I could ever stand a chance against them both. If anyone around here was sick of Spencer and the way the guys run the school, *I* could have been the person they voted for in protest. But now Lauren was running and who would realistically vote for me over her. Let's be serious here.

Maybe I should just have dropped out while I was ahead. But then how do I explain to my parents and my councilor why I quit as early as I did?

Sorry I dropped out before the election even began. I wasn't in the mood to get my brains bashed in between two rocks for some dumb popularity contest I stood no chance of winning to begin with.

One day into running and I already felt like garbage. So much for building confidence...

But maybe they're right. Maybe I need this as a life lesson or something. Worst comes to worst, I'm sure Lauren would let me be one of her staff members. She's a sweetheart, I'm sure she'd understand why I want this so bad. Treasurer or Secretary or something else would still look good on a college application. Plus I'm only a Junior so there's still a whole year to try to run again. Or just settle for Class Rep and hope somebody like Victoria or Casey or Heather blows me out of the water and be done with it.

But Spencer? As if. He'll just give the jobs to his buddies and probably relegate all the actual work to Ashley or that other girl, Tracy. It's not like they didn't do the exact same thing when Charles was the President and he turned the place into a frat house. Spencer probably doesn't even know what a Treasurer does and he's still the incumbent from last year!

High school is so unfair.

Beth

After the conversation with Katherine proved more productive than I could have ever anticipated, I escorted my undercover lover back to her car. It was a Lexus, only a few years old. Lauren's father worked in the oil business. He was a regular J.R. Ewing and he had the money to spend on his little Princess. Giving his daughter a car for both her sixteenth birthday and for being scouted by major Division-1 schools was not so much as a drop in the bucket for him.

Lauren gave me a ride to school. Everyone came out to see her fine new ride. I think that was the first time I had ever seen her flaunt her wealth before. Lauren was not the type to just throw wads of cash around like a Vegas blackjack savant. She was careful to keep her status as a bonafide one-percenter fairly quiet. She told me that she felt like she was bragging whenever she just casually paid for dinners or for gas for her friends if they needed cash. I made sure not to make a big deal over the fact that she lives in a mansion on the very rich fringes of the school district. It has to be worth somewhere in the eight figure range.

But her money is not what I fell in love with.

I will never forget when we first met. In the gym after her volleyball practice. I had only just moved to the city a few weeks before classes began and I was walking into my Sophomore year with no friends. Spencer was not yet the "king" of the campus. Ashley was only just becoming one of the most popular girls in school. Charles Bruxton was the captain of the football team. Kara Alderman ran the school with an iron fist. Grace was still alive. Times truly do change.

My trip down memory lane was interrupted when Lauren's car honked as she unlocked it. It was amazing to have a friend who was willing to give me rides home all the time. I despised the bus and everyone who was forced to ride them. It was sadly a necessity for myself at some points, but it makes me feel constrained. It makes me feel inferior.

Enough with the personal reflections. Business starts now.

"We need something big if we want to get you to win this," I reminded her gently. "Spencer has the State Championship game all but guaranteed this year."

"And he has Homecoming King and Queen basically locked up with Ashley," Lauren added.

She was not wrong. Those two "lovebirds" had the most beautiful relationship in school. They were the "Brangelina" of the Junior class, presumably without the abuse allegations. I hope, anyway.

"Ashley is not a threat," I lied. Much as I hate her, she was and we needed her out of the picture as soon as possible.

"She's Head Cheerleader."

"*You* could have been if you tried last year," I reminded her.

She had to choose between cheerleading and volleyball when the chance to play in college came up. Lauren was a natural cheerleader, though. It was like watching a professional dancer when she performed at the football games. I was transfixed. Even though she was on a

full squad, I only had eyes for her. She eventually noticed watching her at a basketball game because she smiled up at me. I wanted to vomit. She decided that she had more of a chance at a big scholarship as a volleyball player and committed to it full time over the summer.

I still believe she could be Head Cheerleader if she had stuck with it, even if Kara Alderman had chosen Ashley to be her little pet project and groom her for the job after going to a couple parties together and doing blow with her in the bathrooms. The mental image of Ashley playing a subservient role to her ex was nothing short of delicious.

"There is no way I could have survived kissing Kara's ass for an entire year. And to be honest, I don't even care about cheerleading anymore," Lauren complained as she put our backpacks in the trunk of the car. "And she's also Spencer's girlfriend now."

Something in her voice almost sounded sad for admitting that. I hated that.

"They really are meant for each other, huh?" I asked, sourly. Maybe a little too sourly. I decided to lighten the mood with a little joke. "I wonder if they ever made out on the throne."

Lauren did not respond. She did not even crack a smile. I felt like she was having bad memories. I could *feel* it just from the look on her face. I knew they used to be an item, same as us, except it got messy. Lauren never discussed it with me, but I filled in the blanks. Context clues can solve almost any mystery. Deciding I had to act fast before she got herself sad and possibly unwilling to go against her old flame, I went for the kill.

"Alright, enough about those idiots. Is anybody at your house right now?"

A small devilish smile began to grow between her cheeks. "Why do you ask?"

I gave a quick glance around the parking lot. No one is near enough to see us. I love the ignorance of others. Before Lauren could react, I leaned in and kissed her. She tasted like strawberry. It was my favorite of her lip glosses. Lauren enjoyed it for a glorious moment before opening her eyes and looking around the parking lot in panic. She quickly pulled away.

"Let's go before someone sees us," she whispered as she hurried into the driver's seat.

"Aren't we eager?" I teased.

Lauren quickly waved at me from inside the car. "Let's go! Come on!"

It takes a little convincing to get some people to do what you want. A little motivation can get people moving. Money, gifts, dinner. Motivating Lauren is very simple if you know her well enough. I know her like David Duke knows dirty words for Jewish people.

I barely got inside before Lauren put it in reverse and began to drive off. She already had the sunroof open and I felt the urge to stand up and look outside like some California skank. Putting my hair down was something I rarely indulged in. But something about Lauren made me want to let my guard down. She was special like that. No one else had ever made me feel so free.

What I saw from inside the car as I prepared to stick my head out the roof made me feel better than any kiss Lauren ever gave me. Ashley standing on the sidewalk, staring into the car. Her face was a mixture of anger, depression, grief, and just plain loneliness. If she was anyone else, I might have pitied her. Seeing the embodiment of heartbreak and anguish was almost enough to make me feel the most simple twang of guilt.

But it *was* her so I could not have given a shit if I tried.

Ashley

Lauren smelt like lavender. It was some new shampoo she was using. It was intoxicating. I couldn't stop smelling her hair. As weird as it sounds, I nuzzled my face into the side of her head. She giggled and asked me what I was doing.

"Smelling you."

Never before has a statement been so full of love.

She couldn't help but laugh and just kinda lay there so I could get my fix. By the time I pulled away, I felt drunk. We stared into each other's eyes. It all just felt so right.

I had only just turned fifteen, but I knew she was the one. I'd never been so sure about anything in my life. You could ask me when my birthday was and I wouldn't have been as convincing with my answer than if you had asked me how I felt about Lauren Bradshaw in that exact moment.

I was in love.

We'd been together for most of the year. I'd obviously seen her around the school throughout my Freshman year and we had cheer together and everything, but she was just another face in a crowd of literal thousands and I was too gunshy to learn anyone new's names. We had one class together, an English class. She seemed smart and gave a good presentation on *Grapes of Wrath* when we had to give a book report on it, but for the most part we just never spoke. There was so much going on and I was still getting settled in the new school.

I went to a private K-8 school for my entire life until then. We had maybe... 200 kids total? Maybe 300? It was a small school. I would have gone to another private school for the college prep courses, but the divorce kind of sapped our finances. Dad provides what he is expected and then some, but it would have been too much on the two of them and I was fine with going to a bigger school. I thought I was, at least. It took all of Freshman year just to feel like I belonged, but even then just barely.

What really made things better was being asked to join the Cheerleading squad. I was on the squad in grade school, but it was *grade school cheerleading* and I quit after seventh grade. I decided that I wanted to focus on myself as much as an eighth grader possibly could and cheer was just taking time away from that. But then I got to high school and was really lacking in the friend department. I got the invite from Casey's older sister, Maria, who was the Captain during her Senior year. I had just started spending time with Casey and Heather and I think she realized I was lonely and needed an outlet again. This was like going from NFL Europe to playing in the Super Bowl. I date a quarterback. I needed to study up on football lore just to keep up.

I took to it like an otter to water.

While I was relearning everything I had forgotten, Lauren quickly became one of the stars on the squad. She was balancing being a volleyball player, a cheerleader, and a straight-A student flawlessly. I had begun to notice her more when we cheered together, but I was still pretty green and trying to get my bearings. With Maria's support, however, I quickly started

gaining confidence and people seemed to notice. Lauren and Kara included. I actually got invited to parties, something I never thought would happen when I was in grade school.

Being noticed and accepted was the sweetest feeling ever.

While I was ascending the ranks of high school life, Lauren was also becoming the star volleyball player. I'd be lying if I said I didn't really *notice* her until I saw her in her uniform. In my defense, half the football team were sneaking peeks into the gym while they worked out in the weight room next door. I decided to go to a game on a Thursday afternoon I had off after practice and she was, to put it bluntly, a star. She was all over the court and doing whatever the technical terms for being the best player out there are. I never got into volleyball terminology.

The fact that I ever managed to ask her out at all was nothing short of a miracle. It took everything in me just to force myself to see if she was interested and just ask her out. We had been talking for a while and even though I suspected she was like me, I couldn't be sure. When she actually said yes, I almost screamed with joy and then just died of a heart attack right there in front of her.

Now she's driving home that disgusting little weasel with ratty hair and the personality of a dead rat. It's only been a couple of months and it still hurts to see her with someone else. As selfish as it sounds, I hated her for being happy. Bad. I don't blame Lauren for moving on. After what happened, she shouldn't be the one who can't get over it. I'm the fuckup who ruined things.

She knew I saw them together. She was looking right at me. I wanted to choke the life out of her. She's such a bitch.

As soon as the car turned away and I couldn't see them, I grabbed the papers from my car. And then I went to the bathroom to get high and cry my eyes out.

CAMPAIGN

Spencer

As the incumbent Treasurer, my job is to be sure we have enough money to make it through the year. It's not like it's a big deal. Whenever we need money, we just go to Mr. Hardy and he makes a call to the booster program or talks to Mr. O'Reilly. We have a budget for the dances, sure, but they don't bust our balls if we go a hundred bucks or so over. It's not a difficult job whatsoever. In hindsight, that's probably why Charles gave it to me. He didn't want me to fuck things thing up for him.

That being said, I made sure not to abuse it. I remember the story about the guy who was Treasurer a few years before me. He was on the basketball team. Dylan something? To put it bluntly, he embezzled the money so he could buy weed. He ended up stealing almost a thousand bucks! They almost didn't have Prom that year because he stole most of the money. Word is he ended up working in the school as a janitor over the summer to pay it off since he couldn't exactly unsmoke the weed. Even if he could, what would they do with it? Go to the police? A drug scandal would ruin this school. I did a report on the Pittsburgh Drug Trials for History class and it was crazy how badly it hurt sports up there. There was a guy who threw a no-hitter while tripping on acid. I've never done acid, but I can't imagine that was easy.

I guess what I'm trying to say is I didn't take the job as seriously as I probably should. Ashley pushed me around over it. She was so worried about Homecoming being a total disaster. After what happened Sophomore year, I'm shocked we even got approved to do Homecoming Court again during Junior year. I heard they kept it the way it is because they wanted to honor me because of some rumor that I'm going to transfer to St. Mary's next year. I still don't know where that one came from. I like it here. All my friends are here. And besides, I have a better chance of getting recruited from Arlington.

College was right around the corner and I still didn't know what I wanted to do. Sure, I could just take a generic "Communications" major that is simple and requires no effort because I'm making a push for the NFL, but what's the point in going to school if I'm not going to actually focus on the future? My dad thinks I'm an idiot for not worrying more about the NFL than I am about what happens *after* football. It's not something I want to ignore.

As of that point in my life, I'm torn between a few schools. The Texan in me wants nothing more than to go to the Longhorns and help rebuild their program. The professional in me knows that the only way I'd get real exposure is by going to one of the big SEC schools. Ole Miss. Florida. LSU. Georgia. Ala-fucking-bama.

I knew that Texas and Oklahoma are going to be joining the SEC in the future, and Oklahoma has a very strong program, but look at how being in it has worked out for schools not named Georgia or Alabama like Auburn, Arkansas, Missouri, and Mississippi St. If I want to get killed by Nick Saban, I'd rather go to one of those schools to at least say I played in the toughest conference in college football. Personally, I think Texas signed its own death warrant by considering switching conferences. Now I'm terrified of going to that school and being blamed for multiple losses to Alabama every year.

But it's what my dad wants...

I wasn't sleeping much lately. All this pressure about my future was making me feel sick. I don't get anxiety attacks or anything, but I couldn't sleep knowing all these big decisions are coming. I shouldn't be panicking about college courses and who I'll be playing against in a couple of years when I have biology homework I should have done over the summer due tomorrow morning and a football game of my own on Friday. On top of that, Ashley expected me to take her out for our three month anniversary. What the hell even is a three month anniversary? Since when do people go out for a special dinner to celebrate being together for *three months*? It makes no sense.

I'm sitting there while Frank, Tom, and the others are more or less screaming across the room to each other and I had a killer headache and I didn't know where Ashley went. She left the student council office ten minutes earlier and she was supposed to bring back the sheets with signatures saying enough people support our campaign. It was a thing that every Presidential candidate was expected to do before they could begin campaigning. Getting signatures to show people actually want you to run. Kinda dumb, but it's whatever.

Having an "End of the Summer" party was a great way to get this little roadblock out of the way. It's not against the rules to campaign outside of school. How do they expect to enforce that? Apparently they tried a few years earlier and some guy got kicked out of the election for it. Do they assume people don't talk about their lives when the final bell rings?

I just hoped nobody threw up on the packet...

I already had the list of positions filled out in my head.

President: Myself (duh)

Vice President: Frank (again, duh)

Secretary: Ash

Treasurer: Tom

Historian (whatever that means): Probably Brad. Casey or Heather if not. Or both?

Some people were inevitably going to accuse me of just wanting to fill the positions with my friends and I'm not going to lie to their faces and say that's not exactly what I planned on doing. I just want to make sure my friends get something for their college apps, even if it's as insignificant as Historian, which I still don't understand but it's *something* I guess. And every one of these people will make sure the dances are fun so who cares who has the job? Plus it's not like anyone who would run against me won't do the same. Since when does someone not join a club because their friends are in it or because they want to get close with someone already in it. That's how Brad got his girlfriend last year. He and Melanie were really good together. I never found out what happened.

"Order! Order! Order!"

Frank hadn't even been elected Vice President yet and he was already smacking around that gavel like it was the funniest thing in the world. First time, sure. Second time, okay. Fifteen times later, I'm getting a migraine.

He turned to me with a big old grin on his big dumb face. "I love doing that."

Nobody was even talking. But what could I do except roll my eyes and smile? He was my best friend, irritating as he is.

"Alright, first Student Council meeting of the year," Frank announced to the room of about ten people. "We have a big day coming up and we all need to work together if we want to stay in power. Our Good President Spencer has the floor."

"Okay, first, not elected yet," I reminded him with a smile as I stepped up to the podium. I hated public speaking. Even talking to the team was kinda rough for me, even though people say I'm a natural leader. "So we lost four great people to graduation that we will need to replace. And with a new Freshman class, we're going to have some new friends around here."

"Do we really need to deal with the Freshmen?" Tom complained from his seat in the corner. Casey was sitting beside him. They had become quite close over the summer. Ashley suggested the two of us double-date. I think she just wanted an excuse to talk to Heather for an hour or two.

"Hey, we were all Freshmen once," I reminded him. "And besides, they're going to vote for someone, but we need people we can trust. So Sophomores, you're on that."

I never understood the innate hatred for Freshmen. Sure, they were the new kids on the block, but why pick on them? Why do teachers despise them so much and think they're just grade schoolers? They're teenagers like everyone else around here. What makes them so different? I hate the idea of "paying your dues" to get respect. Especially with sports teams. It's archaic.

Tracy, one of the Juniors who was a Sophomore Class Rep last year, raised her hand. "Um, please pardon my asking," she said timidly, "but where is Ashley?"

Truth is, I had no idea and it was kind of annoying that she seemingly flaked on us. I told her I was freaking out about this whole thing yesterday and I was begging her to be her with me. Then again, she almost never abandons me when I need her so maybe something is wrong...

"She should be here any—" As if on cue, Ashley finally arrives with the large brown envelope under her arm. She was also wearing sunglasses now for some reason. "Amazing timing as always, babe," I said with a smile, trying to make light of the situation. "Ashley has the papers that you need to fill out to run for re-election. Make sure to get these to Mr. Hardy by this Friday or else you're out of the running. He's very strict about it."

Ashley pulled the papers from the envelope and started passing them out. When she got to me, I tried to lean in and kiss her. She pulled away and I was left making out with open air. As much as I would like to say that nobody saw this and only I could be embarrassed for myself, everyone was staring afterward and I felt my face go red as a tomato.

"Okay... um, what news do we have from the Junior class, Tracy?"

Tracy began flipping through her little notebook. She was like the unofficial Historian or Secretary or whatever of Charles' Student Council. She was basically given the job when Ronnie Abraham stopped giving a shit after the first meeting. He was one of Charles' buddies, but I never liked him.

If any of my first picks didn't want either of the jobs, Tracy would get one in a heartbeat. Mostly because she was the only one who would actually do the work. She was very smart and she took good notes. Plus she was extremely loyal and she managed to get information fairly easily from people she barely ever talked to. All in all, she was a real asset. She didn't seem to have many friends, though. I felt bad for her.

"Apparently Lauren Bradshaw is expected to run for President this year," Tracy said, very matter-of-factly.

I can't say I was shocked. She was extremely popular and drop-dead gorgeous. If I wasn't as popular as I was, she'd wipe the floor with me. She'd be the biggest competitor out of anyone else who ran against me without question.

"Makes sense, I guess," I said as nonchalantly as possible. No need to scare my friends with the possibility of me losing so early. "She's really popular. Who else?" I was dreading the answer, especially since it was still so early. Anyone could try to run.

"On the way in, I think I heard a girl named Katherine Duvall says wanted to run. Word is she's been asking around the girls' soccer team for support. Do you know her?"

"Brown hair?" Frank asked. "Glasses, kinda short?"

"That's the one," Tracy confirmed. "She's in my Algebra class this year."

"Oh, I know who you mean," I said with a smug little grin. "Trust me, she doesn't have a chance."

Truth is, I knew nothing about her except what I'd seen in the yearbook. Debate Club, Science Club. She wasn't one of us by any means. She was kinda cute, I guess. In a geeky way. But I never really gave her that kind of thought. She was smarter than me, that was easy to tell, but she'd never beat me in a popularity contest. She could easily beat me in a public speaking competition, though. I was not looking forward to doing the debate with her before the election. Still, I felt kind of bad just brushing her off the way I did. I don't even know her. Maybe she's a good person and I'm just ridiculing her for nothing.

"Are you sure?" Tracy asked. I could tell she was judging me for how I said what I did.

"I'm more worried about Lauren," I admitted. I turned to Frank. "Figure out what you can from the cheerleaders tomorrow. Ask Michelle for some dirt. Maybe she'll tell us what Lauren is thinking and what she'll do."

He gave me a fist bump. "You got it, boss."

"In the meantime, the rest of you, we need to see who else is going for Lauren," I ordered. "If we can turn them now, she'll be done for."

Brad sat forward. "Probably both basketball teams and the girls' soccer team. And volleyball, obviously."

Brad was a monster of a guy. He was our star linebacker for two straight years and looked every bit the part. Now he's a Senior and was getting looked at by UCLA, along with lots of the top schools in Texas. We might be playing together in a couple of years if we make the same choice. He's a great player and a born leader. If he didn't want to rock the boat with the team, he could easily win if he ran against me.

"Good, good," I agreed, nodding my head. "Alright, let's get this going and we'll meet here again on Friday with what we got."

Wasting no time, Frank stood up. "Meeting adjourned!" He gave the gavel a few whacks and grinned at me. I just smiled and shook my head. He's a good guy.

As the others packed up and hurried to get out of here, all too eager to leave after staying late on the first day of school, I approached Tracy, who spent extra time packing up. Frank and I talked about this all night the day before. If anyone could do what I needed, it was her.

"Hey Tracy, could I ask you something real quick?" I went out of my way to sound as innocent as possible. As innocent as a seventeen year old boy with bad intentions could, anyway.

She was just about to leave, but she stopped in the doorway when she heard me call her. "Yeah, Spencer? Is everything alright?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah," I assured her. "So look, I didn't want to say anything to the others, but I know absolutely nothing about this Kaitlyn girl."

"Katherine," she quickly corrected.

"See, I don't even know her name! That's why I need you!"

So yeah, this wasn't exactly the best sales pitch I have given, especially for what I was going to ask her, but it's what came out when the time came. I could feel Ashley drilling holes into the back of my head with her eyes as I said it.

"To do what?" Tracy hesitantly asked, nervously chuckling afterwards.

"Be her friend," I requested. "Go to football games with her, eat lunch together, it doesn't matter. Just learn more about her and tell me everything you can. And whatever you learn, bet back to me and tell me anything you know."

"You mean spy on her?" She was clearly uncomfortable with this idea. In hindsight, this was very heartless. Trying to force someone to be friends with someone else because you want to spy on them. It makes me sound like a psychopath.

"Trust me, this is for the best. And if you come through for me, remember that I always help my friends. Food. Homework. Boys. Whatever you want, I'll provide."

If there was ever a time I felt like a wannabe mob boss, it was now. Spencer Soprano.

"I don't know..." I could see her glance back at Ashley for emotional support. Whatever Ashley did gave her no reassurances. It wasn't her idea and she made this very clear a few days ago that she didn't like the idea of doing this to my competition. We didn't know who it might be at the time, but she wasn't exactly friends with this Katherine girl or anything so I don't know why she would be pissed about it. We had a bit of a fight over the whole thing. Might explain why she'd been so cold lately.

“Are you seriously going to use that girl to be your mole?” Ashley asked, disgusted. Telling her it was Frank’s idea only made things worse. “You’re actually going to listen to *him* on this? Just because someone *might* beat you in a dumb election?”

“*You’re* the one who wants me to even try to win this dumb election.”

Ashley wasn’t having it. She left shortly after I said this. We hadn’t really talked since.

“Do it, and I guarantee you’ll get reelected or get one of the jobs in my Cabinet. It’ll be easy.”

What else could I do except guarantee she has a job? She needs this for her college applications, same as everyone. She told Casey so last year. She might be a certified genius, but extracurriculars are just as important as grades. I don’t need to worry as much about my GPA since I’m some kinda quarterback prodigy or whatever. But someone like Tracy who is probably aiming for some big smart people school like Duke or Harvard needs something to stand out.

A relenting Tracy nodded her head. “Just promise we won’t hurt her.”

“What? No, never! I just want you to be nice to her. You’re the best, Tracy!” I winked.

Tracy turned and left before we could talk anymore. My stomach was a pit. I felt gross. I didn’t have the nerve to be honest and say that Katherine would probably get hurt if the truth ever got out. That made me feel worse. Part of me hoped she would just tell Katherine so she could tell everyone else and just ruin my reputation around here. Would that work? I doubt it. I was kind of untouchable around there.

Ashley approached once Tracy was gone and shut the door. “And you said you didn’t want to do this,” she mocked.

“Like I said before, *you* are the one who wanted *me* to do this,” I reminded her, my anger at being blamed for this rising up. “You’re...”

“Don’t even think of blaming me,” she growled. “Frank is the one who wanted this. You could have said no. What was he going to do? Be mad at you for one practice and then go back to kissing your ass again like always? Oh, what a nightmare!”

“Ash...” I exhaled slowly. “Please don’t fight.”

Ashley shook her head. “What’s done is done. You’ll beat the girl who doesn’t stand a chance and you’re gonna break her heart in the process. Congrats, Mr. President.”

Wanting to change the subject, desperate to change it if we’re being honest, I pointed to the sunglasses. “So what’s the deal with those? Were you...” I pantomimed smoking pot. I could use some right about now to calm down.

“What? No.” She sounded genuinely angry that I even suggested that. “After that stunt the Senior football guys pulled at Prom last year, they’d expel me for even thinking about that.”

“That wasn’t my fault either.” Things got out of hand. It wasn’t my call.

Ashley shook her head. I knew better than to stop her from opening the door to leave. “It never is.”

Katherine

Knowing that I was going up against the most popular people in my grade did throw me off balance for a while. I spent most of the afternoon panicking about the thought of going against them. It wasn't until I sat down and really thought about the whole situation that I really decided to commit to this election.

The whole idea was to build some confidence and actually build for an actual political career down the road. I won't always be the favorite in an election. I'd be lucky if I even got a small percentage of the vote. I'll probably be the underdog for most of my life. Lower-middle class left winger in a solid red state. Actually trying to be politically active while all the people around me worry about their nails and boys and stuff.

I already have a hill to climb just to even consider a career in politics. Not saying it's completely hopeless. I did have a lot going for me. But when popularity is everything and I can't promise things like eliminating student loans or free healthcare that would otherwise easily get me votes in an actual primary or general, I had to rely on making as many connections as possible.

I didn't have much of a plan for this, sadly. We're only allowed to hang so many posters to campaign, mostly because they don't want us clogging up the hallway with pictures of ourselves. Since I don't have the luxury of being a star athlete and can win votes through my physical prowess, I was playing with a massive handicap. Being everyone's friend is the only way I can possibly win this.

Mr. Hardy is such a good teacher. He actually tries to help us become better students *and* better people. I knew nobody else here cares, but I did. Let them call me a teacher's pet or a know-it-all loser. One day, I'll run this country and they'll be serving burgers at McDonald's. Or worse, eating them. Mr. Hardy was the one who suggested I run. He said it's time someone besides the populars did something for this school.

I know that sounds cruel, but people are cruel in life. I've been bullied, laughed at, ridiculed. I don't want to stoop to their level. I don't. It's just so hard sometimes to be the "bigger person" and turn the other cheek or whatever I'm supposed to do.

It was going to be tough, but I swore I'd give it my best shot. Everyone should be sick of dealing with stuck up popular jerks by now. If they are, they'd vote for me. I just knew it. Regardless of how it all ends up, I wanted to make a difference for the little people and I swore I wouldn't turn into some asshole to do it. Clean campaign all the way. I'm like Prince Zuko in a way. Honor means everything to me.

They can at least respect me for that, right?

Beth

It was so nice that Lauren had such a hardworking father. He was almost never home, despite being rich enough to retire comfortably before the age of fifty. It left us more than enough time to spend in each other's arms without fear of interruption. Nothing makes me more angry than being forced to pause our clandestine romances because of the threat of being caught. Chalk one up for carnal pleasures and hormones for making such an otherwise disgusting experience so much fun.

"That was fantastic," Lauren muttered as she slowly began to drift off to sleep.

"I love you, too," I whispered before kissing her forehead.

She nuzzled in close and yawned one last time before drifting off to sleep. She looked so beautiful. She was practically glowing in my arms. She is so peaceful when she sleeps. Like a baby deer. But I could not have a baby deer. I needed a lioness ready to snap a wildebeest's neck if she was ever going to win this election. She was too sweet, too nice. Too willing to compromise and be friends with anyone. She would eventually have to pick a side or we would be doomed.

Early the next morning, Lauren picked me up at my home and we made our way to the school. I made sure to lean in and kiss her at every single red light and stop sign we hit, so long as no one was looking of course, but I really did not strain my eyes to look. I needed her to be excited to start the day and wide awake. We had business to attend to.

When we arrived at the school, we grabbed the posters I had worked so hard on for weeks in advance. Lauren insisted she help, but she was busy with volleyball and schoolwork due during the first week of classes and could not attend my little private art class. I really didn't mind. I had loads of free time on my hands and wanted to be sure they were perfect. She deserves perfection. Nothing but the best.

Now comes the most difficult part of the campaign: actually campaigning. So much could happen, but I knew Lauren has a spotless record so they had nothing on her to ruin our chances.

"You seem so chipper this morning," she said with enthusiasm. I know I had a tendency to be a bit morose and sardonic, but today would be the beginning of weeks of hard work. How could I not be absolutely delighted. This was the fun part.

"Just preparing for my best friend to be the future leader of the free world."

Lauren shook her head, laughing. "Why are you so obsessed with this? It's just a student council election."

"You're not seeing the big picture!" I exclaimed. "We could make a real difference around this shithole!"

"Not sure calling it a shithole will get us votes," she mused.

Fuck these people. This school is a dump.

"I'm serious, though," I went on, undeterred by her jokes. "If you run on a *For The Little People* platform, they'll love you. Everyone wants someone they can believe in and will give them a better school life. *We* can make a real difference around here for them."

"And who can we make a difference for who exactly?" she asked.

I shrugged. "People like us."

Checking around the hallway, I saw the place was nearly empty and anyone who was there so early had their faces buried in their phones or were asleep on the floor. With no one paying attention, I took her hand and squeezed it, mustering up the sweetest smile possible.

My forwardness worked. She was blushing like a little kid, but she did not try to pull away. "What's gotten into you lately?" Lauren asked.

"I just want to be more open. Why should we worry about what these losers say?"

I really did not know if it was a good move to come out or not. We lived in a new age where this was nowhere near as big of an issue as it was for the previous generation. But the fear was there. The American political spectrum has been horseshoeing back around in a way that openly discriminating against gay and trans kids for political clout with the Boomers was cool again. Pure 80's hysteria bullshit. Fucking WASPs.

I did not fear being bullied, especially by old bigots who would be dead in a few years. I proved that with Grace. I could grit my teeth and bare it. Anyone who would discriminate against me for who I am is not worthy of my time. They're leeches, the drudges of society. I feared for Lauren and what they would do to her, though. She is just too nice and sheltered. She didn't endure what we did last year. How I managed to avoid dragging that baggage into my friendship with Lauren, I still don't know.

We stopped to hang up a poster I had whipped up a couple nights ago. "Besides," I said, a bit too loudly, "these losers need someone to remind them about right and wrong."

Our moment of peace was short-lived, though. The bane of my existence, Ashley Williams, approached us. She held posters of her own under her admittedly rather toned arms. If she would have cut down on all the time she spent at the gym improving her body and instead used that time to improve her personality, we might have actually become friends.

"Calling the voters losers won't help you win, ladies," she mocked. Whatever pain she held from seeing us together the day prior was translated to pure malice now.

Tell it true, I was glad it was her to see us. Anyone else may have asked questions. "You know what's funny?" I asked. "She said almost the exact same thing a couple minutes ago."

"Isn't life incredible like that?" She smiled at us.

We both knew she could ruin us if she wanted to. But she also knew that whatever she tried to pull, I would hit back even harder. I have as much dirt on her as she does us, maybe even more. Between her closeted sexuality, her mercilessly bullying of me and Grace last year, and her purse likely containing enough blow to intoxicate a small island nation, she was anything but the perfect little princess she liked to dress up as.

"What do you want, Ash?" Lauren asked uncomfortably. She was still on rough terms with her after how they ended things. I was still amazed it had only been a couple of months. Lauren practically jumped into my arms when I made a move on her.

"Oh, the usual. An Italian sports car, a bottle of fine wine, and a boyfriend who actually gives a shit about me." She thought she was so clever. It was nice to know Spencer more than

likely left her sexually unfulfilled, though I seriously doubt that was difficult. He lacked the specific hardware she required.

"I wouldn't wish for wine and a new car together if I were you," I answered. "It'd be a shame if you crashed straight into a tree."

"It'd be a shame if people found out about you two hooking up in the parking lot after school."

I could sense Lauren tense up beside me. This was a big fear of hers. Even though I was pushing for us to be open and out, the thought of being outed without her consent made her have panic attacks at night and drove her right back to Narnia. I was undeterred, meanwhile. I had to be strong for both of us.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Ash, come on," Lauren pleaded. "Don't do this."

Ashley chuckled and shook her head, her light brown hair swaying around her shoulders. "Forget it," she said, posture straightening out. She must have felt untouchable for that brief moment. "Like I care what you two do in your free time. But other people might..."

"Please don't tell anyone, Ash," Lauren pleaded. "Please?"

Ashley stared at her, rage in her eyes. "Or what?"

"It'd be a shame if O'Reilly found out about why you need to go to the bathroom twice a day for your awful nosebleeds." I rubbed the side of my nose. Being straight edge is a blessing. Drugs are stupid and sobriety is only boring if you let it be.

Ashley was very unhappy that I managed to turn the conversation back in my and Lauren's favor. "I don't know what you're talking about and remember that my mother is a lawyer who—"

I'd had enough. She could cry and whine as much as she wanted, but I was not going to hear her threaten me with Mommy. I took Lauren's hand and brushed aggressively past her.

"Tell it to someone who cares, Carrie Fisher."

I decided to end the conversation on the high note I had set for myself. I left Ashley in the dust and still had Lauren. I did not need this level of negative energy ruining my otherwise adequate second day of the new school year. Deciding it was still early enough to go outside without fear of administrative action and the risk of a public display of affection resulting in being noticed by one of our peers was low, I headed for the main doors.

Footsteps trailed behind me as I exited the school and made for Lauren's car. To quote the song, I was blinded by the light of the sun. The outdoor heat had to be pushing nearly eighty degrees Fahrenheit despite it not even being eight in the morning. I could feel myself beginning to perspire just from walking at an easy pace. You know that weird effect when heat emanates from the pavement and makes it look like you are staring into a glass of water or a pool? I could see that all around the parking lot. Texas was nothing like Pennsylvania.

"Jesus, Beth, that was pretty mean," Lauren complained when she caught up to me.

You're right. It was mean. But not mean enough. Thank you for the criticism. I'll try to do better the next time around.

“If she wants to mess with the bull, she’ll get the horn,” I informed her as we approached the Lexus parked in the section of the lot designated for upperclassmen. “Let her make her threats. We’ll always be one step ahead.”

Before she could protest, I sighed, turned, and hugged her. The combination of the sun and the warm soul clutching onto me was suffocating, but in a good way. For a brief moment we were one body, united for all to see. It was relieving. “I know I was a bit harsh with her,” I gently whispered into her shoulder. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I’ll handle everything with Ash and Spencer. You just stay beautiful and popular and do whatever you can to get votes. Okay?”

Her tension evaporated when she rested her head on my shoulder. “Thanks. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I pulled away and studied her eyes. She had the deepest pools of blue I had ever seen. Like hidden coves on the coast deep in the jungle that have been untouched by pollution or human interference. So innocent. Then I pressed the posters into her chest. “Now go hang this stuff up and I’ll go see Hardy to make sure we’re all set.”

She smiled at me. “I guess I’ll see you in English then.” She winked at me and turned to walk away. I couldn’t help but drink in her body as she walked. Every step was invigorating. I could feel my heart picking up steam. I didn’t care if someone saw me staring. I didn’t mind the sweat glistening my body. She was worth it.

She makes my soul feel... I never thought I’d feel this way again.

I love that girl with every fiber of my being and would do anything for her. And if that pathetic junkie Ashley thinks she can push her around, she has another thing coming. We’ll always be one step ahead of her, regardless of what dirt she can dig up on us. So let her have her cheerleaders and coke and brain-dead boyfriend. I’ll have the love of my life running this dumpster fire if it kills me.

If anything or anyone comes between us, there’ll be hell to pay.

Katherine

Our school ran on a block scheduling system. Every day, we'd have different classes and we'd alternate how many of those classes we'd have per week. Today, for me at least, I had Gym, English, French, and Computer. Tomorrow would be Algebra, Bio, European History, and Econ. My "B Day," which fell on that Tuesday as it was already the second day of school and everyone but the Freshmen got to skip the first Monday of the year, was going to be much more difficult than my "A Day" in terms of how much work we had to do. Thankfully for me, my "B Day" was more like a rest day. Gym was like a wakeup period, English was pretty chill, I'm all but fluent in French because my mother lived there for seven years, and my Computer and Econ teacher is a really chill guy who doesn't push us or assign too much work.

That day's English class was like every other first day of class. Ice breakers with people we already knew, syllabus stuff, and just waiting for the class to end so we could either go to lunch or start third period. Mr. Hardy, the overseer of Student Government, was the English teacher. He was a really cool guy. Early thirties, not too pushy with homework. He seems to really get it. Like he is still young enough to remember what high school was like, but not young enough to be weird about it or try and smoke with the guys at a house party like what happened last year at Westinghouse Academy in Fort Worth. That was still so jarring to read about.

Because it was the first day and he admitted that he knew none of us wanted to learn on the first day, Mr. Hardy gave us a bit of a break and just talked with us. Frank chimed in and pointed out none of us wanted to learn at all.

"Is that true?" Mr. Hardy asked. "Does *no one* want to learn *anything* in here?"

Personally, I love to read. I'm not one of those Instagram girls who posts a picture of my "book of the week" or quasi-inspirational quote that spoke to me from inside a poetry book nobody knows the name of. I like *stories*. Fiction. I don't mind fluff pieces. Post-apocalyptic is fun and can be very moving. There's a Creative Writing elective I was dying to take next semester. It was supposed to be this semester, but they had to push it back since the original teacher had a heart attack. I felt bad for Mrs. Lewis. She was nice.

Some of my other classmates, such as Frank, weren't as moved by the written word. "The stuff we had to read over the summer," he complained. "Catcher in the Rye? It sucks."

"Really?" Hardy responded with a cool smile. He leaned back against his desk. "Why?"

I don't know if Frank was ready to defend his case. The others in the class turned to face him. He tensed up a bit with forty eyes on him now. Even I couldn't help glancing back to see how he would react to being challenged in school. He was a jock, but admittedly a good one at that. He's had things handed to him for three years now and not just because he's a running back.

"The main guy, what's his name, uh..."

"*Caulfield*?" Lauren chimed in with a little smirk.

"Yes, thank you, him. I mean, he just cries and mopes about how sad he is all the time—"

"Doesn't every teen mope and cry sometimes?" Hardy asked.

"Well, not like that, no—"

“So he’s unrelatable? You can’t empathize with him because you don’t have this inner desire to just be pissed at the world and hate it without fear of repercussions?”

Frank shook his head. “I didn’t say that.”

Admittedly, I was not a fan of the book and had to agree with Frank on some points. I never thought this could happen, but I felt the urge to speak up and support him. I couldn’t understand why this book was so controversial when it came out. It’s still on ban lists today. I guess we’ve just become so desensitized to this kinda stuff. I mean, how many shows and movies or books or even real life events end with the main character being a spoiled brat who hates everyone and threatens to kill themselves to get what they want or shoots up a school or kills their girlfriend and the cops go on some big manhunt trying to find them?

Apparently Beth felt the same way and spoke up after Frank and Hardy went back and forth for a couple minutes. From what I remembered from our time together in American History last year, which was the first time I’d ever actually met her, she *never* spoke up unless she was called on. But I was more surprised she came to the defense of Frank Newman. She did not strike me as a fan of the popular caste.

“If this book was written today,” Beth said, “Holden Caulfield would be skinning cats and using racial slurs on Internet message boards to get cheap laughs from other scumbags. This book should not be banned because society has become so desensitized to what made it controversial in the first place.”

It was weird knowing she and I shared an opinion on this issue. Like, almost to the word.

“Yeah, Mr. H., she’s kinda right,” Spencer added. “I mean, there’s a lot darker shi... sorry, *things* that get stuff banned anymore. Catcher is just kinda... boring. And generic.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Skins? Or that new HBO show that everyone’s talking about, Euphoria?”

“Oh, my God, I *love* Euphoria!” Heather exclaimed, to which Casey chimed in and began discussing it in detail for five uninterrupted minutes. I hadn’t seen the show yet so I basically got spoiled for every single big moment in the entire season. Oh well.

The conversation continued to escalate and in minutes, most of the class was engaged in a discussion of what should be banned and what shouldn’t be banned, what should never make it into a book and what is fine, really anything. I could see Mr. Hardy was impressed with us just by looking at us debating literature.

The topic of slasher flicks came up when Frank, ever the shock jock, spoke up again. “If we’re talking about nasty stuff,” he continued. “What about *American Psycho*?”

I’d seen the movie, but never read the book. It was a lot to take in. I wasn’t a fan of it for a number of reasons, even though Christian Bale is a phenomenal actor. I stopped when they got to the threesome scene. It made me uncomfortable. More than the murder scenes.

“Have you read the book?” Hardy asked.

Frank hesitated. “I mean, no, but I watched the movie.”

“Read the book if you want a prime example of what can be featured in a book that still manages to be published,” Hardy said. “It gets very gruesome at times. And pretty homophobic. Worse than the movie. Legally I don’t think I am not allowed to *recommend* this for you kids...”

The *but...* hung heavy in the room and the people more fascinated with the macabre turned to look at their friends with wonder and excitement at their English teacher totally not suggesting they get their hands on a copy. I wasn’t one of them.

“How bad?” Frank asked, his eyes bugging out of his head. He was *loving* being able to talk shop with an adult. For once, I thought he’d actually be interested in a class and thrive here.

“He talks about carving out eyeballs and turning a girl into a sausage,” Dennis Stockman, one of the other football players, called out from the back of the room.

Frank glanced back at him, eyes wide with a big, toothy grin. “No shit!” Frank laughed when Dennis nodded. I feared for the future of the human race.

Lunch was next period and I didn’t want to ruin my stomach. “Can we please not talk about that?” I muttered. I was close enough to Mr. Hardy that he could hear me without issue.

“Yeah, this is getting a little gory,” Mr. Hardy said. “Let’s bring it down a notch.”

“I thought we were talking about what we can and cannot write?” Frank reminded him. “Isn’t this exactly what we were talking about?”

“It’s just gross,” I said, my stomach in knots. I heard a couple chuckles. I hated being the one to raise my voice about this and having everyone see me as the weak loser, but it was getting too much for me. I can’t even watch *Alien* because of that one scene with the alien in the stomach. It gave me nightmares when I was little.

What I wasn’t expecting was the discussion to take the feminist route when Caroline Wright, a Sophomore who got to be in the Junior English class, mentioned how it treated women. Based entirely on what I saw in the film, I agreed with her that it did not paint women in a good light. Especially with all the torture scenes that I heard I missed.

That was when Ashley, who had been silent the whole time, spoke up.

“You know the movie was written by two women, right?” I really had no idea. In fact, I was shocked any women worked on it at all, given the subject matter. I wouldn’t even touch it if I were in Hollywood. Ashley clued us all in very quickly. “Yeah. Mary Harron, who also directed it, and Guinevere Turner. Harron went to Oxford.”

“Wait, how do you know that?” Frank asked from across the room.

Ashley shrugged. “I like movies.”

The bell rang, ending the longest discussion we’d had in a class since the guys did their Fantasy Basketball draft in Computer class last year. Part of me was actually sad it was over. I knew that despite Hardy’s best efforts, we’d never be this engaged again for the whole year. When you can manage to get the jocks talking about books, you should be proud of yourself as an educator. I’m impressed, Mr. Hardy.

Beth

As much as I hate the bitch, Ashley did have some good points about American Psycho. While I found the book to be rather grating and tedious with its long diatribes about pop culture, it was rather interesting to learn the movie was written and directed by women. I am positive I discovered that fact at some point, but I had forgotten up until she reminded me.

I stand by what I said about Holden Caulfield, though. Most antagonists in media today who want to be perceived as “edgy” by the 50 year old men who write them are nothing more than Dylan and Eric wannabes. They are little shits who smash beer bottles and want to shoot their schools up because they are mad at the world are the lowest form of media.

This is a topic I have given a lot of thought to in recent years because of events in American politics stretching back to that fateful day in 1999. If I was writing a character who was on the spectrum of insanity, I would not want to write about a character like The Joker or Dylan and Eric. I would rather write someone closer to Elliot Rodger, the perpetrator of the Isla Vista massacre in California and anointed godfather of the modern incel movement. “Massacre” is putting it rather extremely, though, given that his body count was relatively low and he did not manage to shoot up the sorority that he intended to. I find him to be a fascinating case study into how the mind of a sociopath works and what can be done to prevent others like him from rising and continuing what he tried to start.

Incels are the most pathetic form of life there is. I would rather be a vegetable in the hospital being fed through a tube than subject myself to the self-inflicted torture that is being an incel. I have no desire to let some cry baby who thinks women are property fuck me and I can speak from personal experience that any self-respecting woman who feels the same does not want to subject themselves to this fate either. Any woman who does needs mental help and should seek it immediately for the good of humanity.

As a teenager who grew up during the 21st century, I am experienced at traversing the web and learning of the back alleys the morally inept have settled into. The people who are physically aroused by the Columbine shooters and write romantic fanfiction about themselves and the boys getting together makes me particularly sick to my stomach. If I shot a school up, it would not be in a desperate attempt at getting some lonely teenage girl to write erotica based around the pathetic desire inside of them that wants to “save me” and make love to me to prevent me from enacting revenge on those who wronged me.

For the record, I would never shoot a school up. Too messy.

If I wanted to fuck a lonely girl, I could do it. I do not believe it would be that hard in our current age. I could set up a Tinder profile right now. I might not be Ashley, but I am not ugly by any means. If I can screw Lauren’s brains out every night now, I am sure I can find a Lonely Lizzy who desires my companionship through the power of dating apps and social media later.

This election had me stressed out. I needed some ice cream.

Ashley

I've been a fan of old movies for most of my life. My dad used to bring home stacks of old black and white films on DVD or tapes and I'd stay up until morning watching them. I learned a lot about film from this. It inspired me to want to make movies myself. If I had the time or a good enough camera and some friends who took it seriously, I'd do it. We have an A.V. Club, but only people in it are massive dorks. It would ruin my image.

Through these films, I discovered the likes of William Holden, John Cassavetes, James Stewart, Elizabeth Taylor, the infamous Bette Davis and Joe Crawford feud, and directors like Ford, Coppola, Welles, and Scorsese. That's just to name a few off the top of my head.

I personally loved American Psycho and learning that women were behind the camera creating it made it one of my personal favorites. The fact that women made a movie about a sociopathic man who butchers them like cattle is morbidly inspiring to me. They actually gave it some flavor and gave the main girl some agency even though she was nothing more than a walking target for Patrick Bateman to fuck and murder.

I know I sound preachy, but it's the truth.

I liked to stay up late at night some days watching the movies my dad left behind. When they were settling the divorce, I begged him to let me keep some of them, a request he was all too willingly to accept if it made things easier for me to digest things. It's in writing that no matter how bad things could get financially for either him or Mom, those tapes and DVDs belong to me now. He wants me to have them and pass them onto my kids. I don't think that will ever happen for a number of reasons, but he doesn't need to know the specifics. Not yet anyway. In the meantime, I'll watch them until they stop working.

I remember making Lauren sit down and watch old movies with me. She used to complain that she couldn't see anything well because they were in black and white. While I don't mind the slower paced movies that take time to develop, Maltese Falcon or Liberty Valance for example, she preferred the fast paced Westerns and gangster stuff. But not Godfather. Never Godfather. She couldn't stand the lulls between the major scenes. We'd argue so much over it when deciding movies. This argument went on for weeks. She never even finished the first one, she had to finish it at some point. If we couldn't decide on a film, we'd just make out and fall asleep. She was my first. I still remember how soft her skin was. She took such good care of herself.

Truth is, I don't think she even liked watching any of the movies with me. I think she just did it because she didn't want to fuck or go out anywhere and risk being found out. By the end of our relationship, our rendezvouses at my house were exclusively having sex, doing homework, maybe having more sex and her going home. It became soulless. Like we existed only to pleasure one another. I know it was all my fault. I was such a mess by the end. I still am. It's probably for the best that she got out when she did. I tried to make things right. Why did I just have the volume up so loud?

Did I need to chime in and give a TedTalk on the history of a slasher flick?

No.

Did it feel good proving how smart I was to everyone?

Of course.

I wanted to look back at Lauren and Beth to rub it in how cultured I am. But I restrained myself. It would only piss Beth off and that was a headache I did not feel like having. Besides, just looking at Lauren makes my heart ache. I knew she was better off with someone else, but why did it have to be so soon? I'd take her back in a heartbeat if she'd have me.

Tracy

Just seeing her there made me feel gross. I felt like I was going to throw up if I so much as breathed near her. She's the real victim in all of this. She didn't deserve this. Spencer is such an asshole for suggesting this. For even *thinking* of it, for that matter. Did Ashley approve of this? She'd be just as evil as he was. Is this what one more ounce of popularity is worth? One more notch on his belt of achievements in high school that don't matter when he goes to college?

Katherine was struggling with her sign. Banner is the more appropriate word for it, really. It was bigger than she was.

VOTE FOR KATE BECAUSE SHE'S GREAT

It was simple. Kind of generic. But it looked pretty enough and all the words were different colors. Not the sign I would have gone with were I in her position.

But I'm lucky. I don't need to think for myself. Why be independent when you can have a powerful high school demigod do all your thinking for you? I'm just a drone in the hive of popularity. Maybe one of Spencer's inner circle will choose me as its mate at his party after the game on Friday night. I would give *anything* to have a sweaty neanderthal be assigned my fuck buddy as payment for all my hard work by our Dear Leader. Thank God for Spencer Barnett.

I walked up to Katherine, dreading what was to come of this otherwise innocuous interaction. "Need some help?" I felt guilt seeping into every word.

"God, yes, please," she sighed with relief. "This thing doesn't want to stay up."

It was the middle of the day and none of the hundreds and hundreds of other students even bothered stopping to help a girl hang a sign up. I shouldn't judge them, though. Who was I to call the kettle black?

"Be sure to use bigger strips or else it will collapse," I said as we tore the tape together.

"Hanging signs that are taller than I am isn't exactly my forte," she said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, no kidding. Here, put more pieces there and there," I ordered. I tore the pieces of tape off and she placed them where they needed to go. All in all, it looked pretty strong and might hold up. We made a good team.

"You really know what you're doing," she complimented.

"I was one of the people who got to hang up Charles and Spencer's posters last year."

I spent all night thinking of how to win her trust. I can lie well enough, sure, but I also have a conscience. Eventually I decided that playing the bitter lackey would be the best bet. It would be more method acting than anything. I feel sick again.

"Sounds... fun?" She wasn't quite sure what to make of me trauma dumping on her. I couldn't blame her. I wasn't exactly being subtle or anything.

"Oh absolutely," I said with a sneer. "And even though I'm supposed to be a Class Representative, I got a cushy job as a Secretary for my troubles." Spencer never cared enough to

take the job after that Lonnie guy never showed up after the first couple meetings last year. It just sort of ended up falling to me.

“Oh, really?” she absentmindedly asked while she applied the tape. “What’s that like?”

“Pretty boring. It’s just Spencer and his yes-men joking around the whole time,” I complained. Like I said, method acting. Drawing on personal experiences.

It seemed to have worked. Katherine rolled her eyes. “Do they even do anything?”

“They usually leave that to people like me and then we wait for them to make a decision,” I answered truthfully. Charles did do some stuff to prepare for Homecoming, but he was gone shortly after. Spencer’s gang of enablers was nothing like Charles’ people. Extremely arrogant and cocky, sure, but the Senior class was brutal last year. Especially Kara.

“How long does that take?”

“Bit longer than you’d think,” I said with a sad smile she didn’t see.

I glanced over Katherine’s shoulder for a brief moment and I regretted it. Frank, Tom, and a few of the other guys were standing across the hall. They all gave me a thumbs up in unison. I couldn’t look away fast enough.

I took a deep breath. I had to push it all past me. I had a job to do. As shitty as it made me feel, these kinds of things would help me get ahead around here. I could be Vice President or even President next year if I tried hard enough and gained the connections. All these people will be gone and I could run this place the right way. A way where people like me don’t get pushed around and intimidated by the football players for sport.

“Can I be honest with you?” I whispered, as if anyone else cared what these two nobodies would be talking about.

Katherine looked concerned and leaned in closer. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think Spencer is going to win.”

“What? Really?” Katherine’s eyes were wide.

I nodded. “Lauren is rich and popular and totally beautiful. Plus nobody around here actually *likes* Ashley so why would they want her bossing everyone around even more? Spencer is actually really concerned about his chances.” It all came so naturally. Maybe I did have a career in politics. “But don’t tell anyone I told you. Promise?”

“Promise.” But then I saw suspicion in her eyes. “Wait, why are you telling me this?”

“I’m gonna level with you on this,” I said. “I *need* to be on the staff of the winner because I want to go to Yale after I graduate. It’s my only dream in the world and I need anything I can get for my application. I have the grades now, but I’m only a Junior. Three years of being on the Student Council would be amazing for my chances.” I forced a sigh. “There’s no way I’m going to be reelected this year as Class Rep. I’m not popular enough and last year was kind of a fluke. Victoria and Jasmine are running and there’s no way I can actually beat them.”

I wasn’t interested in thinking about all of that again. It hurt too much to remember. Katherine knew what I was talking about, though, and it’s not like I was lying to her or anything about this. I needed this so badly. It was the one thing I had ever dreamed of since I was young. Both of my parents went to Yale. It was my destiny. I had to do this or I’d never forgive myself.

Katherine wasn't dumb. She was reading me like a book. I could tell she didn't trust me. Who was I, one of the people on student council *with Spencer*, to tell her something this out of the blue when we had never even spoken before today? She had to realize I was playing her.

"What's in it for me?"

The sweetest words a double agent could hear. All I needed to do was sell myself like a cheap whore and I was in. I hate myself so much. "I know exactly what it will take to beat Spencer. If we split the popular kids between Lauren and Spencer and their greasy little sycophants, we can sweep up the rest of the school. Play them against each other and you can win. There's only so many popular people around here, right? And don't forget, *I'm* at every student council meeting from now until next month so I'll know everything that they do. Any dumb decisions or good ideas, any rumors, any gossip, whatever they say that wouldn't leave those doors without Spencer's approval? All yours."

It was as juicy as an apple and sweet as a peach. How could this girl say no? Being this close made me see how soft her eyes were. And she had a very nice complexion and bright shiny teeth. I wondered why she didn't have a boyfriend yet. Even after one conversation, I could tell she was nicer than half of the girls in the school. That only made it harder for me to go through with this whole charade.

"And you'd want to be my Vice President if we teamed up?" she asked noncommittally.

I gave her my most devilish grin. "Why settle for nothing when you can have it all?"

Katherine took a second. A long second. I was practically holding my breath as I waited for her to give me a solid yes or no answer. She finally smiled and extended a hand. "Let's do it." Her hand was soft. She must moisturize often.

It was painful to shake her hand. I was dooming this girl to a fake friendship. I would be as kind to her as possible until then. She deserved that much. I swore I wouldn't be as cruel about it as someone else might have been when it came time to rip the bandaid off. It felt like I was in a relationship with someone that I knew would never last, but didn't want to end things out of fear of hurting their feelings. I am such a shitty person.

"And by the way," she added. "Call me Kate. I hate going by Katherine."

When we finished hanging the poster up, I really took in how good it looked. Kate chose a long stretch of hallway between the front door and the entrance to the gym. Everyone would see it as they came in and left for the day. The sun shone brightly on the letters and made them gleam. I think there was some glitter mixed in as well. For a brief moment, I was actually proud to be working with her. I'd forgotten all my issues with going along with this and thought she and I could make some serious change around here.

As we turned to walk back down the hallway, I realized we had to go by the football players. They pretended not to notice us, but Frank gave me a wink as we walked by. Any of the pride I felt evaporated. All the guilt festered inside of me like an infected wound. I was back to feeling like a stupid piece of shit for ever agreeing to do this.

Spencer

I wasn't at all shocked when Frank came into the locker room and told us Tracy had followed through with her promise to help us. I felt a little bad that we were using her to manipulate the girl, but we needed every edge we could get. I don't follow politics, but I know a strong third candidate could doom us if the people they take are my potential voters. At least that's what Ashley says. Ashley talks a lot about it. I sometimes tune in to whatever she's talking about, but usually end up zoning out if she keeps going on and on.

Frank wasn't happy that Lauren and that Beth girl had a stack of posters and fliers on Hardy's desk before first period began. He moaned about them getting ahead of us before we even got into school. I didn't really care. I wasn't coming in at seven in the morning to put up posters for a popularity contest.

Practice came and went. We went over a few new plays that I thought worked very well. I was more distracted about life in general and I kinda played like garbage. Ashley had been really cold with me lately. The guys were up my ass about the party. Megan was stressed about going to high school next year even though she's only been back in school for a week and my dad wasn't making it any better with all of his bullshit.

Next Wednesday was the third anniversary of Mom's death. I thought about trying to skip that day and just drive around the city. Maybe Coach will understand and give me a day off.

Beth

The highlight of my school week was arguably my Political Science class. I knew it would be as soon as I enrolled in the course. The only reason I got into the class was because I had to beg the teacher, Ms. Fischer, to let me take the class as my elective. Playing up being the new kid who needed an outlet that she was actually interested in, despite being enrolled in the school for over a year now, she pushed Mr. O'Reilly to accept me in the class despite it usually only being available to Seniors or select AP Juniors the school deemed as having a bright enough future they could flaunt at open houses to increase enrollment.

Not that I couldn't make it in the AP Program like many of my peers. I just chose not to.

In all honesty, I simply refuse to waste time in a system that will require far more effort than I am willing to give to this school. I have the grades to get into any good college. If I bothered to play some sports, I could probably get into a big school with ease. But the amount of work the AP Program would expect of me would interfere in my own personal affairs and I could not allow that.

My having taken a sort of "Intro to Political Science" class back in Pennsylvania was more than enough to get me enrolled in the course. When asked why I was interested in taking this course despite my lack of real qualifications, I continued to play the scared new girl with few friends and an honest interest in the world of American politics.

Tell it true, I just wanted an excuse to see the political future of America and weep.

I watch the news as often as I can and read headlines from every source, major and minor. I scroll through Twitter for a self-imposed punishment of thirty minutes per day spread out over the course of several hours. I even trudge through Facebook to see what the older crowd has to say. I consider myself extremely up-to-date on the socio-economic landscape of the world around me. If I was in college, I guaranteed I would have countless horny pseudo-intellectual males begging to bend me over my dorm room desk while reciting the works of Chomsky, Trotsky, and Sartre in a vain attempt to arouse me with their alleged grasp of the leftist spirit.

But in high school, no one cares about the real world. No one follows the big picture. No one cites theory as a benign excuse to get in a girl's pants. Oh sure, there are the girls who make a big deal out of abortion rights or the occasional boy who stands up for the religious politician caught cheating on his spouse with a homosexual prostitute in a motel room because his zealot parents told him it was the right thing to do, but the little details make up the big picture. Not these "hot button topics" that are forgotten about when the midterms are over and they need to move onto the next major problem to draw up donations.

As with every syllabus day, it was a slow class. We discussed what would happen over the semester and I could see at least two people deciding they were going to drop the course after they learned it was not a burner. The topic of religion did come up after a half-hour when discussing the issue of morality and this proved to be the fulfillment to what I had hoped the class would be like. One of the Seniors, a naive Senior girl named Hanna Burnokowski, asked Ms. Fischer about morality and whether it comes from a higher power or not. Given the legal

issues with preaching in a public school, she was unable to give a “yes or no” answer. I had seen Ms. Fischer exiting a local megachurch on one of my neighborhood walks a few weekends ago so I had an idea of where her personal views were, but she did give a decent enough speech on “we make our own morality” to the confused girl.

I do not believe there is such a thing as a “higher power” and if there is, it does *not* create the concept of morality. Humanity has the ability to do whatever we wish. We did not create the world we live in, but we can shape it however we wish. That’s why our society is doomed. We have made our bed and we must sleep in it.

I suppose the technical term for my views would be best described as “agnostic.” I do not believe there is a god, but how can I know for sure? The universe is vast and anything is scientifically possible. But if there is a god, I have some choice words for it for how it has allowed the world to go to such levels of shit. I especially have some things to say about how it let humanity treat people like me and Lauren and Grace like absolute shit for so long. We deserved the world and we couldn’t even kiss in public for fear being called dirty slurs or sexually harassed or beaten to a bloody pulp.

Life isn't fair.

Katherine

I wasn't sure how to feel about Tracy Summers at first. We had never really spoken before she approached me and offered to sell out Spencer and the other popular people. And here she was: sitting on my couch bashing Spencer, Ashley, and the others.

"Oh, and Casey and Heather are going to fall apart in college without Ashley to lead them around," she said. "I wouldn't be shocked if they try to follow her because they're terrified of life without her. And, God, don't even get me started on Heather's little sister, Candice. She tries to hang out with them all the time and she is so annoying."

I wasn't sure why she had such an issue with Heather's thirteen year old sister, but I guess it had more to do with her desire to get things done for the school during meetings at Spencer's house and not listen to middle school gossip. I think it would be kind of entertaining to see what the latest issue with little kids is. I feel like that makes me sound old.

Tracy then went into a rant about Ashley's drug use. *Alleged* drug use. I'd heard the same rumors that everyone had by now, but Tracy had a first-hand account. Whatever Ashley had done to Tracy had made her more than willing to share.

"She came to Spencer's house an hour late and she was practically bouncing off the walls. Her eyes were all buggy and she was practically throwing herself at Spencer. I basically had to run out of there because Ashley was so fucked up." She sighed. "I felt bad for her. She's in a horrible place."

Even though she was mad, I could tell she felt bad about oversharing this story. Part of me felt a little jealous she got to be alone with Spencer for a while, but I instantly felt regret over being jealous over something as simple as working with him. I'm a mess.

Tracy went on to discuss how Lauren was recruiting the girls' basketball team and how Frank was genuinely afraid they were going to lose. I still had my doubts. Even though I liked my chances of at least taking *some* of the voters away, I'm still not Spencer or Lauren. Tracy laughed when she talked about how Frank and Spencer were actually on the verge of having an argument over the idea of losing a high school election. I wasn't tempted to ask her why she was so mad at them, but I decided against it.

Instead, I offered that she stay for dinner. She seemed like she really wanted to leave, but I insisted. She eventually said yes and we had a genuinely good time together. My Mom seemed to like her as well. I thought we really grew as friends that night.

Speaking of fights, I arrived at school on Thursday bright and early with the intention of hanging more signs and trying my hand at some campaigning. I hadn't been on campus for five minutes before I walked in on Beth and Ashley having a bit of a scrap. I missed the bulk of the argument, but I did distinctly hear Beth say *Careful. The voters are watching.* as I stepped into the hallway. Ashley glanced over at me and proceeded to storm off. Beth had been good to me before and I wanted to be sure she was okay. I didn't have any issues with Ashley as a person, but she wasn't someone I would go out of my way to comfort unless I felt like I had to.

Beth stood there staring daggers into Ashley's back and she walked away. I swore I could see smoke coming out of her ears. When I gently placed my hand on her shoulder, she was as tense as a bowstring.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked. I've always found it to be a dumb question. Of course the person being asked isn't okay. You wouldn't be asking if the person was okay. It was just a simple kindness that made the person asking look like an ignorant asshole.

"I'm fine," she curtly responded. "Princess didn't sleep well last night."

While I didn't want to take sides, I could tell that Ashley wasn't in a good way. She was wearing sunglasses so I couldn't see her eyes, but she still looked rough. Thinking of what Tracy had said the night before only made me feel sad for her. I thought about maybe reaching out to her and seeing if I could help.

"It wasn't right," I said. I wasn't really taking sides with something like that. Playing the middle man that anyone could approach with their problems was something I usually excelled at, but this issue was much greater than I was used to.

Beth didn't respond. She glanced up at my banner hanging on the walls. For a moment, she said absolutely nothing and stood totally still. She took it all in, observing every finite detail of the multicolored banner that stretched the length of the hallway, going from door to door unopposed.

"Vote For Kate Because She's Great."

I couldn't help but smile. It was innocent and simple, almost childish I suppose, but I thought it was sweet and my Mother loved it and offered to help me make it. I politely declined because I wanted to be in charge of my own campaign. I don't know if it was a personal desire to show my maturity or some rebellious part of my adolescent self trying to prove that I didn't need my Mom to succeed in life. After it was finished, I knew it was well done and was more than excited to show it to the world.

"I spent all weekend on that," I declared with a smile.

I had expected a smile in return. Beth simply nodded and continued to stare.

"So I guess this means you're running?"

"I'm gonna try," I admitted. "You're okay with that, right?"

Beth grew deathly serious. I did not expect her to turn to me and look me in the eyes.

"Don't ask if someone's okay with something," Beth said. "Especially this. If you want to be a real politician, you need to have a backbone and know what's best for you and the people close to you. Normal peoples' feelings don't matter if you really want something. It's you against the world."

To say I was taken aback by the advice would be the understatement of the century. I mean she basically said it was okay to be a sociopath in order to win. How could I possibly process this at the moment? It was like dropping a bomb on my house.

Beth never came off a violent person before, but I really took her in as she observed me. She had these purple bags under her eyes that suggested she was not a strong sleeper, if she even

slept at all. Her eyes themselves were a piercing gray color, almost spear-like in the way they cut right through you. I felt physically uncomfortable just looking at her.

But then I really thought about what she was saying. Then I related it to my actual life. My dreams, my goals. I had put serious thought into politics. They say you can't please everyone. Not everyone in the world will be happy with every decision you make. If I want to be a politician one day, I'm unfortunately going to have to burn bridges with some people I won't be able to help when other people need it more. They're going to hate me, but I'm going to have to keep marching on. I never knew if it was better to be feared or loved, but I had to make a choice.

As much as it pained me to admit it, Beth was right.

It took me what seemed like ages to come up with a response. My personal epiphany wouldn't come until much later, though the seeds of doubt in my personal code of ethics were sprouting in front of her. "You're right. Thanks. Really, thank you, I needed that."

Beth's aggressively honest facade dropped and she smiled warmly at me. I felt a wave of relief wash over me as soon as she did. It felt as though I could breathe again. Like I finished the big speech in front of the crowd and now I could sit down and relish in the response.

"If you want to stand any chance against me and Lauren, you better be ready," she said with a wink. "We're going all out this year."

I didn't doubt it. From what Tracy said, they were already making strides on Spencer.

Deciding that she wanted nothing more than a clean fight, I extended my hand and confidently looked her in the eyes, hoping to replicate even a fraction of the levels of energy and situational control she had just directed at me.

"Then may the best woman win."

She smiled and shook my hand. It was a firm handshake, though not enough to hurt me.

As I turned to walk away, I caught one last glimpse of my poster. For a brief moment, I actually felt pride in my life. I felt as though I was in control of my own destiny. That no matter what happened, I would give it my all and maybe even come out on top.

Spencer

I ran into Lauren between classes. We were waiting for the line to die down at the water fountain. It was like two coworkers running into each other at the cooler in the office, but both employees are up for a promotion that everyone in the office has a bet on which one of us will get it. I think that's how office politics work. I'm not sure. If I ever have to work at a desk and punch numbers for the rest of life, I'd probably kill myself.

She smiled at me and said, "Hey, Spencer."

"Woah, hold on a sec," I said, raising my hands and taking two steps backward. "Can we be seen talking together? Given the circumstances."

"Eh, I don't give a shit," she said, now grinning. "I'm still on the fence about running, anyway. It's more of a Beth thing than a me thing."

"Yeah, I feel that," I admitted. "This whole thing was Ashley's idea. I mean, I'd be cool with becoming President and everything, but she cares a lot more than I do."

She batted her eyelashes a few times. "You know you could always drop out, right? Make things a little easier for me?"

Lauren Bradshaw was easily one of the hottest girls in school. Every guy wanted to fuck her and people made it very, *very* clear how badly they wanted her. She posted a picture on Instagram of her in this really small sky blue bikini and every single guy on the team couldn't shut up about how great her ass looked for weeks. People still bring it up months later. I swear some guys would just take one look at that and be able to survive butt naked in the tundra.

I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't go for it if she wanted to. But for some reason, she just isn't interested in any of the guys around here. Like everyone knows she French kissed Tony Dellucci at a party over the summer, but she refuses to admit it. Dellucci was a major ass about it and cried and cried to anyone who would listen about how she was a total prude and shit like that. If she only wants to make out, just take the win. Don't be creep.

"Ehh. I'll take my chances." I batted my own eyelashes. I pointed to the water fountain. "It's your turn."

She bent down and began to drink. One of the nerdy Sophomores stopped and stared at her ass as she was bent over. I shot him a death look and he ran away. Being the gentleman I am, I made sure to keep my eyes well above eye-level. It was hard. She had an amazing ass.

When she stood up, she brushed her hair away and said, "Well, whether we actually want to do this or not, may the best one of us win."

We shook hands and smiled. "Good luck to you, too."

"You better get to class." She winked and walked away. Her hips swayed with every step.

Fuck, I needed a cold shower after that.

Beth

As I stared into the Biology textbook in front of me, the words seemed to bleed together.

How could I be so careless? If someone besides Katherine had seen me lose my cool, I would be doomed. *We* would be doomed. I made a damned fool of myself. I got careless. The desire to make her look bad was as addictive as the chemicals she inhales through that nose.

Something about that girl just drives me wild. I wish I could put my finger on any one issue. They all disgust me. I suppose it's the inhuman levels of carelessness for her situation. She was a (formerly) wealthy white teenage girl with countless connections and opportunities that anyone else would need to sell their souls for. She was dating the high school quarterback, she was pushing for Valedictorian by her Senior year with her grades in the AP Program.

She has an admittedly stunning body that has even turned my head on occasion. Attraction to your bully, maybe? This angers me the most as I do not have eyes for anyone but Lauren and know I never will again. There's just something about her that managed to keep me up at night.

And yet she throws it all away for the cheap thrill of a white line snorted up the nose.

Anyone else would cherish what blessings she was allotted. Were I in her position, I would drop the drugs and the boy on the spot. No distractions. Dying alone and being successful beats living while failing to achieve your potential. No amount of sex or cocaine can replicate a life of achievements and merit. I learned this already. It was her turn.

Watching Ashley Williams waste her life before it even began made me pity her.

She needed motivation. I decided I would be the change she needed to bring into her life. It was all too easy to rip a piece of looseleaf paper out of my spiral notebook and begin writing on it. Ashley was probably having trouble studying lately anyhow. With all the junk she is cutting up with Daddy's credit card, there cannot possibly be room for books.

If anything, I was doing her a favor. She could repay me later. I had several ideas.

Spencer

The hardest part of my relationship with Ashley was admitting to myself that she never loved me at all.

Ash and I were a relationship born of expectations. When I was named starting quarterback and had to replace Charles as Captain, I was thrust into the spotlight. We were told by everyone at the school that we had to get together and it happened. Head Cheerleader and Star Quarterback. Match made in Heaven, right?

Everyone else decided for me just how I was going to experience my newfound popularity. I didn't have a choice. It was very uncommon for a Junior to be named Captain, even if the starting quarterback was the real leader of the team. There was always a Senior who had more seniority and respect from the boys. A Junior could be Co-Captain, sure, but never Captain. I was considered the "exception to the rule." I was special.

Ashley, on the other hand, was destined to be the Queen of Arlington City High. Her parents were fairly wealthy, even after the divorce. She was drop dead gorgeous. She had a fairly successful social media presence. She made friends with all the popular girls and everyone wanted to be seen around her for even a shred of credibility. She was fast tracked to success as soon as Kara Alderman decided she was worth a damn.

When she was named Captain of the Cheerleaders after the school year ended, the guys forced me to throw a party so I would have an excuse to ask her out. I had no choice. It was disguised as an "End of the Year" party, but the guys all knew what it really was.

June 4th. Two days before D-Day's 75th anniversary. Kinda fitting. It was crippling hot. I was exhausted from spring football practice and studying for finals, but now I was expected to throw the party of the summer. Imagine how apathetic to the idea I was until Frank cornered me after practice.

"Ashley told Casey and Heather that she wants to fuck you."

Of course that was enough to pique my interest.

Ashley was the hottest girl in school. I'd only lost my virginity a few months prior to a girl I met when we went on a family vacation to Fort Lauderdale. Her name was Naomi. She was sweet. I think she was eighteen. The thought of Ashley being the second person I ever hooked up with was enough to drive me to drop over three hundred bucks on beer, chips, and more beer.

I made sure Megan was staying over at Heather's house so she would spend the night with her little sister, Candice. They're really good friends. I'm glad she has at least one close friend before they go to high school. Candice overheard that I was throwing a party and she obviously blabbed to Megan.

"I heard about the party," Megan informed me the day of. Literally minutes before she was supposed to get picked up.

My eyes went wide. I'd never hosted a party before so I needed everything to be okay. I didn't think she would snitch to my dad or anything. She had her issues with him, too. Why would she sell me out and ruin my life?

"Yeah. I am."

"Is there going to be alcohol?"

I couldn't help but laugh. I wasn't the biggest partier in the world, but I'd be lying if I said I had *never* drank before in my life. "Yeah," I admitted. "There will be."

"And that's why you want me out of the house so badly?" Her hands were on her hips. She didn't look mad.

"I'll keep them out of your room," I promised.

"Good," she said with a sly grin. I knew what was coming next.

I reached into my wallet and took out twenty bucks. "Is this enough?"

"I think we're going to order a *large* pizza." Her smarmy little grin grew to a full gloating smile.

Another thirty bucks later, literally all of the money I had left in the house, and she was more than happy to let me invite half the school over. She got picked up by Heather's mom a few minutes later. The timing couldn't be better because I had half the football team breaking down my door within the next ten minutes.

That night was, to put it bluntly, insane. I was expecting around fifty or so people. Around three hundred showed up. I was so lucky the backyard was massive or else the house would have been packed tighter than a cannon. It got so bad that Brad and Tom ended up standing guard at the door so nobody that wasn't "invited" got in. I really only invited the guys, the cheerleaders, the other athletes, and some of the popular people that didn't play sports. Anyone else was a tag-along or gate crasher.

After about three hours of hard drinking with my guests and at least two drunken public hookups that resulted in the perpetrators being thrown in the pool half-naked for everyone's enjoyment, I was pretty hammered. Not enough that I was slurring my speech or going to drown in my own vomit, but I was stumbling around pretty bad. I still don't know if I was intentionally overdoing it to prepare myself for the inevitable. I needed the courage.

A sharp jab to the shoulder drew my attention to Frank, who was smiling like a little kid.

"She's here."

I had spent the first few hours trying to keep the peace and being forced to over-drink that I hadn't even noticed the whole reason the party was going on wasn't even at the party. It seemed as though the crowd had departed as she entered the living room. The stars had aligned and my horny drunken ass was transfixed on the girl standing before me.

Flanked by Casey, Heather, and Michelle, as she always was, Ashley was easily the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my entire life. She wasn't dressed up like she was going to the Oscars or anything. She was dressed like any other girl there. But she had added some blonde highlights to her light brown hair and it was more intoxicating than the beer. I always had a thing for blondes and this just did it for me.

I knew I had to get with her. I wanted her more than anything else in the universe.

They entered the kitchen to get their drinks. Every single football player at the party surrounded me, each looking more excited than the last. Frank dragged me to my feet, Brad gave me a bottle of water, and they pushed me into the kitchen before I could protest. Standing in the doorway with my thumb buried deep up my ass, I had no idea what I was going to say. I needed everything to be perfect.

Ashley smiled at me and glided across the floor toward me. She stopped at the granite island in the middle of the room. She leaned forward just enough that I could see down her shirt. Fuck, I wanted to scream.

“Yes, Spencer?” she asked with a grin. “Did you need something?”

She was leaning in close enough that I could see her pupils dilating, though that could have just been the light. My dad installed some fancy lights that flash like strobe lights when you play music. They were annoying, but they made the party really fun. I wasn’t looking at her eyes, though. I felt like a creep every time my eyes glanced down.

I glanced for a second above her head and found Casey and Heather holding back laughs. Michelle was just smiling and shaking her head. I knew how they felt. This was ridiculous and I couldn’t blame them.

“Yeah, yeah, totally, um, hi, I’m glad you could make it.” I had not yet discovered my ability to speak to women. I’d never felt so stupid in my whole life.

“I am, too. It’s been very fun.” Every word just oozed seduction. I was hooked.

“Oh, yeah, yeah, totally,” I said, shifting my weight between my left and right legs.

“I heard you wanted something to talk to me about.”

Here it was. The fact that I didn’t pass out was a miracle. I could feel the eyes of half the party at my back, waiting for the big moment. I swallowed my fear and let it all out. “Do you wanna go out with me sometime?”

She waited to answer. She waited *a long time* to answer. I wasn’t sure if she was seriously considering the pros and cons in her head or if she wanted to make me suffer and still am not to this day. No one spoke a word.

After what seemed like a lifetime, Ashley stepped forward and gave me the most passionate kiss of my life. I could feel my heart exploding in my chest. I thought I was going to die right there, it was so powerful. It seemed like I was inhaling the pure energy and authority this girl possessed. If that was the only kiss I’d ever had for the rest of my life, I could die happy. But when she pulled away, I craved more. I was addicted to her lips and her body in my arms.

She smiled and looked me in the eyes. “Pick me up tomorrow at five. Don’t be late.”

With her girls beside her and drinks in hand, they strutted past me and joined the party on their terms. She made sure to give me a wink as I stared as she walked away.

The boys swarmed me to give me high-fives and embrace me like I had just gotten married. Everyone knew this was coming, but they treated it as unexpectedly as possible. Hell, I wouldn’t have been shocked if some of them believed she would reject me at my own party and

in my own house. I wouldn't have believed it until Ashley snuck her tongue into my mouth, but only for a second.

And just for that weekend, I was the happiest I had ever been. Despite my hangover, the date went amazingly and she gave me a much gentler kiss to end the night. We made plans for the next date and it went just as well. I made sure to spend the summer balancing football and Ashley. She let me take her virginity after our one month anniversary. It was everything I had dreamed of. She cried a bit after. I made sure to hold her, hoping it would help somewhat. She didn't look at me for the rest of the night. I felt really bad over the whole thing and blamed myself for it. It took almost two weeks until we had sex again, but we were hooking up every couple days after that. Sometimes even twice a day. It was amazing. We got so crazy, I almost didn't have the energy to play football anymore.

That being said, I had never been happier. I was dating my dream girl and I was the hero of the school by promising everyone I met that I was about to lead my brothers to a State Championship. Until the election came around, I had never been happier.

Three days before school started, I overheard the guys talking about how much money they made on the bet that we would actually hook up before the school year started. I apparently made my classmates a lot of money. If we had waited just a few more weeks before having sex, we would have ended up costing over half the bettors nearly three thousand dollars. Frank had two hundred on us hooking up after just two weeks. He had a new pair of shoes when we all went to the mall a few days after Ashley and I did it.

I finally got the girl of my dreams and it was all because a couple people wanted to make some money betting on when we'd have sex.

Word traveled fast, obviously. When I first heard about it, I thought it was some joke the Seniors were pulling on me since I was the new Team Captain and they wanted to mess with the younger guy. Tom told me it was serious, but swore he didn't bet a penny. I got so angry that I nearly quit the team. I couldn't talk to anyone about it. Not Frank, not Brad, not even Coach Mullens. He would have crucified them for doing it and maybe even kicked them off of the team.

I couldn't be the reason we lost a chance at States over some stupid joke. So I sucked it up and stayed silent.

Ashley never spoke about it either and I was never going to be the one to bring it up first. I wondered how much she had bet if she did know. Did she rig the bet one way or another by waiting for as long as she did? Or I was just blaming her because I felt so shitty about myself for more or less allowing it to happen? She seemed like she wanted it. But then she cried and felt really bad afterward. Was that normal? I wasn't sure.

Then I thought more about it. And the more I thought, the more it really made sense to me. I finally learned that our relationship wasn't destiny or people's projections onto us about popularity or high school power couples. It was a facade. A joke. A lie.

And it was all because of Lauren Bradshaw.

Ashley

I should have known something was up with Spencer when he insisted on coming over after football practice. There was a game the next day and he should have been resting up because it's kind of important to be awake for those things, but more importantly he should have been studying for the Biology test. I had to study because I couldn't remember half of that shit and I'd known this test was coming for months now. Who gives tests about stuff you learned a year ago? Nobody remembers this shit. Even though I knew Spencer wasn't as dumb as he acted, I knew he wasn't coming here to be a good little study buddy.

After a brief meeting with my Mom that resulted in us getting snacks and drinks, we scurried back up into my room and he wasted no time fondling me. He may have wanted it, but I didn't. After all the shit with Beth and the argument we had that Kate thankfully interrupted, I didn't feel like having my chest clawed at like a scratching post. I don't care if he was my boyfriend, I have boundaries.

I did my duty and kissed him back. We fell back onto the bed and I became hyper aware of my surroundings. I could hear my mattress squeaking. I could hear my Mom's footsteps in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs. I could feel him trying to undo my pants. The window was open and someone was mowing their lawn. My ceiling fan creaked as it spun around on the lowest setting. It all became too much. I couldn't breathe.

"What are you doing?" I asked, breaking away from the kiss. I needed to come up for air anyway. He practically ambushed me.

"Trying to have some fun." He said it with all the seductive power a teenage boy could muster. Any of the other girls at school would have just gone for it. He's Spencer Barnett. Star quarterback destined for the NFL, most popular guy in school, all that jazz.

Thank God I'm not them.

"But my mom is downstairs," I protested, trying to swat his hand away from my thighs.

He chuckled. "We can be quiet."

One thing I had observed about Spencer was he had a knack for being extremely quiet when we were intimate. I had never hooked up with a guy before him so I don't know how vocal they can be during sex and porn is obviously a terrible indicator, given how fake it is. I always laughed at the guys whose moans sound like dying truck engines when they finish. Not that I liked the girls with their hilariously fake shrieks much either.

But Spencer was different in that he didn't make a sound. I don't know if he was trying to act like he was in control of the situation and hyper focused on what was happening or if he was genuinely scared of what he was doing. Either way, he never moaned or grunted. He blinked an average five times per minute, if that. I thought I was having sex with a statue. The one time he moaned, I almost screamed in terror because I hadn't expected it and it was so *loud*. Talk about a mood killer.

He tried to kiss my neck, but I pushed him off. My neck was my weak spot. Lauren discovered that very early on. Kiss me there and I turn to mush. Even if he did, I was not going

to go any further with him. He didn't make me feel much of anything anymore, if he ever really did at all.

"And we're supposed to be studying for that Biology test. Remember?"

I could tell he was thinking up some kind of dirty joke. He had become so immature over the past month. Nothing but dick and vagina jokes to get a laugh from his friends. Ha ha. So funny. So original.

"You were the one who started grabbing my dick when I walked in," he countered.

Little rat bastard.

"Bullshit, I did!" I shouted. "You started breathing down my neck like some serial killer and started grabbing at *me*!"

He grinned, thinking he was winning. "What happened to being quiet?"

I grunted and pushed him off of me. Defeated, he plopped down on the bed while I made my way over to the desk. I had to pull my pants up and button up my shirt. I felt gross. Used.

"Ash? Sweetie, I was joking."

Have you ever had a day where you just knew you were going to be set off? If anything, *anything* happens that you don't like or find insulting, you're just going to rip that person's head off for even daring to disrupt your fragile state? This was that moment. That one little phrase. He sounded so dismissive, so unaware of his own bullshit. I would never say he was sexually assaulting me or anything, because I always said yes and never told him to stop before, but he should have stopped the moment I actually did tell him to. He needed a reality check and fuck if I was going to pass up a chance to finally give him one.

"That's all you ever do!" I shouted. My cool was lost. It was now or never. His eyes went wide and he sat straight up. "It's all smiles and shit with you! You're never serious about anything!"

"Ashley—"

"No," I cut him off, "*listen* to me! For once in your life, *LISTEN* to me!" The cynic in me expected him to retort or try to defend himself. But to his credit, he stayed silent. He seemed genuinely concerned about what was going on. I took this as my cue to continue making my point. I had nothing to lose. "Ever since we started dating, it's always been about you. You flaunt me like a new car. You decide where we go on dates, whenever you actually *want* to go on dates, and when we do, we just *have* to have sex afterward. Every. Single. Time. You expect me to be the perfect girlfriend your friends want and it gets really exhausting after a while. It's *suffocating*. I feel trapped. I can't take it anymore."

I felt myself begin to tear up a bit so I stopped myself and held my ground. I may have exaggerated things a little. For the first month, things were good. It wasn't until late July and early August that he started acting up. Ever since he and the rest of the team went to a mandatory football camp at a local university. They came back acting like rockstars and mobsters. That was when he went from being gentle and compassionate to douchey and cocky. We only had sex around three times before that, but soon we were hooking up all the time. I did not regret any of it and, again, he never sexually assaulted me, but it was getting too much. We were on par with

newly weds or people in their late thirties trying for one last kid. I actually got scared I was going to end up pregnant because of how often we did it. The condom broke once and I cried myself to sleep that night.

The worst part is I think I only went along with it because it distracted me from feeling like absolute shit about myself for a couple of minutes. I just pretended I was somewhere else and it was over before I knew it.

“I didn’t know you felt that way.” His voice softened. I could tell there was serious regret in his mind. Nevertheless, I had to stand my ground. I fought back the tears and kept sounding as angry as I could. But I took care not to shout. This wasn’t just about him. I knew that.

“If you’d pay attention to me then you might know I’ve been feeling this way for a while,” I countered.

We sat in silence. For a long time. Neither of us dared to make the first move.

Then he spoke. “I’m sorry,” he said. He was sincere. I could tell. “I know I’ve been a dick lately,” he went on after I didn’t respond. “You shouldn’t have to put up with me and the guys and their bullshit. You don’t deserve it. And I don’t deserve you.”

Now I was trapped. On one hand, he does deserve me. Or any girl, for that matter. Keep him away from the guys and he was as kind and loving as any boy I’d ever met. But when they mix, he’s an entitled dickhead like Charles. I was happy to be his girlfriend for a while. Even if it was by design rather than because of mutual attraction. Or because my first choice hated me...

I had to say *something*. I settled with a simple “I never said that.”

“Ash, be honest, you hate me.”

Now I was getting annoyed again. Why can’t he just *listen* to me? “I *never* said that!”

“But you think it,” he countered. “I see it all the time whenever I look at you.”

I had to gain better control over my facial expressions. They betrayed me so much. Even now, I could feel myself wanting to cry and my eyes filling with more and more tears. The dam was about to burst. I wish I could just be stripped of all emotion. Just never feel anything ever again. Especially my regret.

“Is it Lauren?”

Those three words. That was all it took to bring my world to a halt.

There are two “L Words” in my life: Lauren and Love. They were interchangeable. They could not exist without the other. I could not feel the emotion called Love without Lauren and Lauren was the only creature on Earth that I can associate Love with. I love my Mom, I love my dog, I love my Dad despite his faults.

But I *loved* Lauren.

The secret was out. The one thing I felt safe in was known to the world. Oh sure, Beth knew the truth, but she was trapped. If my secret got out, hers was doomed as well. If the world at large discovered I had a relationship with Lauren Bradshaw, how long before they suspect her as well? I don’t know if she fears being out. I can sense she wants to be open with Lauren. God knows I see them acting all cute together when they think no one is watching. But I know Beth knows I’m watching. It’s all a game to her. They could come out anytime they want.

But in my case, I'm stuck in a pit. What Texas school would allow a gay Homecoming Queen, a gay Prom Queen? How could I possibly go for Valedictorian next year if I have people carving my name into lockers beside words like "fag" and "dyke" every other week? I saw that firsthand a few months earlier when Grace put a shotgun in her mouth. The world has become so accepting of gay people in the media and in popular culture, but the people who would hate people like me have only grown more cynical.

Sure I could argue I'm bi, but people would point to Spencer and counter with, "Oh, come on, you're not *really bi* 'cause you're dating a *boy*. You're just *pretending for attention*." I see it on Twitter all the fucking time. It sickens me that so many people openly refuse to consider some people's existence relevant or valid, especially gay people themselves. The ones who try to remove the B or the T from the community because they're holier than thou assholes that think they can exclude people from the community.

I know for a fact that I'm not actually bi and would never claim that label, but Lauren is and I remember seeing how hurt she got when people online and shows like Glee that were supposed to be welcoming and supportive just outright dismissed being bisexual as some silly little fantasy that is all in that person's head. According to them, just because someone is attracted to someone of a different gender, that automatically disqualifies them from being in the community at all.

Labels fucking suck. People do, too.

I felt sick. I had no comeback. I couldn't argue against it. I was stuck there. It had already been a few seconds and he was waiting for me to say something. He had to have seen how scared I was to talk about her. We never discussed her before, except in regards to this election. Even then, I bit my tongue and pretended she was nothing to me. Did I give something away before? Was this my fault? How could he know?

"What about her?"

I had to play dumb. Play innocent. Pretend nothing was wrong. Maybe he would back off. With how much he upset me, I could only hope he would feel bad for daring to accuse me of being in love with another girl and back off. I know how his father talks about people like me. If I even suggest Spencer's acting like his own dad, he will back off immediately.

"I know, Ash," he said as bluntly as possible while still maintaining a certain patience and understanding. "And I know you'd rather be with her right now than be stuck with me. And I'm not mad about it. I don't know... I was just in... denial for a while, I guess. And I'm sorry."

That was the moment I decided I was done running. He was being serious. He was being genuine with me. He was being honest. I had never experienced this in my life. Even on private Twitter and Tumblr accounts where I was as anonymous as possible, I never received this kind of validation. Those strangers helped me a lot when I was in middle school and really confused, but having someone in front of me actually accept me for who I am was... liberating.

But I still was cautious. I had to get to the source of this and stop it from spreading. "How?"

“At the party,” he said, guilt oozing through his words. This was not a conversation he was prepared to have. “Casey got drunk and said some things about how you two used to be so close and now you can’t be in the same room with each other now and I know how much you despise Beth ever since they became best friends... and I guess I just figured it out from there. I mean, I *thought* you might have been friends that had a falling out, but looking back on it...” He hesitated, careful to think of his words. I didn’t interrupt. I needed to hear this. “The more I think about it, I can see how you look at her.” he went on. “Like at the parties and at the assembly and stuff, you just seemed... in pain. I guess that’s how I’d phrase it. Like you lost your bike or had to give up your pet. Something’s missing and you aren’t yourself.”

He’s right. I wasn’t. And I never will be again.

I shrugged, pretending I was indifferent. I wouldn’t let him use it against me. I knew he would never do it, but I had to make that abundantly clear. “So now you know. What now? Are you gonna tell everyone?”

“Why would I do that?” He looked genuinely hurt that I would ask that.

“Because I’m a horrible person who doesn’t love you and can’t be with the person I want to be with. Because I strung you along for months after weeks of pressure from my friends.” I swallowed hard before I said the last one. I knew this would be the killing blow that would end this forever. “And because I wanted someone around because I couldn’t be with her anymore.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” he assured me. “I got that same pressure, too. My friends are douchebags. I know it and you obviously do, too. But I would *never* do that to you. And don’t worry about that last thing. I don’t feel like you used me or anything.”

I recognized a tone in his voice he only used when he was around his friends or going full King/Captain Mode. He wanted to sound convincing. He wanted the people listening to him to show him respect and drink in his words. I guess it was sort of like how politicians have their public speaking voice versus their everyday conversational tone. He never spoke to me with it. Even though it was dumb of me, I actually believed it because I knew he was trying to sound as convincing as possible because he actually *meant it*.”

“Do you promise to not tell anyone?”

“On my mother’s grave,” he swore.

That was good enough for me. I knew he meant it. “After Homecoming. We can win King and Queen and then have a falling out. It will be messy and it will probably split our mutual friends apart, but they’ll get over it eventually.”

I admit I had this whole idea planned out for a couple of weeks now. The point of no return was when he went full douchebag mode at his “End of the Summer Party” and helped the guys ruin some kid’s car who pissed Brad off over the summer. They covered his car in graffiti and pissed on his car seats. The kid didn’t even show up to school this year. I heard he transferred. That was the moment I knew I was done with Spencer Barnett. Now I had an out and it was mutual.

Was I supposed to be happy?

“And I’ll be playing football and be President and you’ll be cheering so we won’t have to see each other anymore, except on the field,” he continued my train of thought. We did have a surprisingly powerful ability to read each other’s minds when we were on the same page. In another lifetime, it might have worked.

“And then I’ll eventually meet another guy and it will be like it never happened.”

Spencer smirked a little. “At least let the wound heal a bit first.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. Maybe I was wrong about him. To some degree, anyway. He needed to seriously look at himself in a mirror sometime and see that he could be a really good guy when he wasn’t trying to be an asshole for his friends.

“You know I don’t hate you, right?” I felt as though I had to be sure.

“I know,” he assured me. “But I know you’d rather be with Lauren.”

“Can you blame me?”

Spencer’s eyes went wide and he exhaled sharply. “Dude, she is like... wow.”

I knew of Spencer’s affection towards blonde girls. It was something we had in common, but never could discuss before now. I was kind of glad we were ending things because now I could return my hair to its natural color and not have to worry about getting it done every so often. More time for myself, even if I did look smoking hot with the highlights.

But then I grew cynical again. I remembered that neither of us had a chance with Lauren.

“And she’s with that asshole Beth,” I said. Then I realized I outed her. Much as I hated her, that was a line I would never cross to get back at someone and not just because I’d be a massive hypocrite. I mentally cussed myself out for doing something so vile.

“Yeah, I kinda figured,” he admitted with a simple nod, “but come on, she’s not *that* bad.”

I felt as though there were eyes in my drawers staring up at me through the cracks in the desk. Thousands of microscopic eyes. Every single dirty joke she had ever made about me played in my head on repeat. I didn’t just hate her. I loathed her. After how I treated her last year, I deserved it. I was a mess. She is right about me and I fucking despised her for it.

Spencer continued talking while I heard that little voice in my drawer calling for me. “But maybe Lauren’ll see just how amazing you are after you’re slow dancing with the President at Homecoming and she’ll beg you to take her back.”

I smiled and sat on the bed beside him. “If you think that’ll cut it for asking me, you’ve got another thing coming. We’re technically not over yet.”

“After all the money I spent? As if I’d waste asking you this way.”

“Spencer,” I grew deathly serious. “How much money did you spend on me?”

Spencer grinned and picked up the Biology textbook that had somehow not fallen to the floor during our makeout session. “Come on, let’s get back to studying. *Just* studying. Promise.”

Deciding I was better off saving the surprise for the Instagram videos, I dropped the issue. We studied for the next couple hours until my mom finished dinner. I could smell the lasagna cooking for the past half-hour. My mouth was watering when we sat down to eat. Spencer excused himself. He wasn’t big on Italian food. Said spaghetti sauce makes him feel

sick. He gave me a kiss on the cheek as all good boyfriends would do in front of their mothers before departing for his home.

We talked about the campaign for a little while before mom got a call from the office. She excused herself to take it. I felt bad that she was still working so hard, even after she had been home for a few hours. I made a promise to myself that one day, I would provide for us. I won't let her bankrupt herself by trying to push pennies to get me into college. If my dad only does the bare minimum, I'll pick up the slack. I owe her that much.

Back in my room, I laid out my outfits for the next day. I find that doing it the day before makes it easier to sleep because I'm not worried about rushing to get ready the next day. My cheerleading uniform was freshly washed and ironed, ready to christen in another season of Tornado football. As Head Cheerleader, I was tasked with deciding on special themes for our uniforms for the games. I decided that we should don glittery blue and white hair ties to start the year. Every game would be a different color. I felt it would add some pizzazz to every game.

As the day dragged to a close and I felt the urge to sleep coming on, I thought back on the events of the day. Spencer was a good guy when he wanted to be. After weeks of being sick of him for being a manchild, he really impressed me with how mature he was about the situation. I felt bad for hurting him, but I needed this. I still had a lot to figure out and I didn't need a distraction in my life that would and can only end with heartbreak.

I'm just glad he understands. I wish I did sometimes.

Beth

I find the idea of giving us a test on our first week back from summer vacation to be nothing short of criminal. The whole point of the so-called “test” was to establish a baseline for what we knew already plus additional material we were expected to teach *ourselves* over the summer. Biology was one of my weaker subjects, though I took the class during my Freshman year back home and never had a grade on any test or project lower than a B-, and the thought of actually receiving a grade for a test we needed to quite literally teach ourselves the material said test consisted of angered me greatly.

There was a whole song and dance over meeting with Ms. Kendall before the previous school year ended to receive our textbook for the next year. I chose a date early on so I got the textbook of one of the overachievers who probably wouldn’t write in it and deface the material with drawings of genitals or bathroom-grade information regarding who was currently looking for drugs or sex.

“I’m really looking forward to working with you, Beth,” she happily said as she handed me a textbook with a frog on the cover.

“I’m excited, too.”

There was not even a fraction of the enthusiasm on my end. Grace had just killed herself a week ago. What did I have to look forward to?

Besides the test, the other activity that was occurring on Friday that I personally dreaded attending was the football season home opener. I do not feel “Tornado Pride” nor do I “Ride the Storm” like my compatriots. Nevertheless, I would be attending the event because Lauren would be there and I wanted to support her more than I wanted to support a collective of sweaty meatheads that will more than likely attempt date rape at least once in their lives. The thought of actually getting excited for the game was alien to me.

Despite all of my personal issues, I slept with ease knowing the real main event of the day was to come.

When I entered the Biology lab, Ms. Kendall was busy speaking with Franklin Newman. Frank served as Spencer’s second in command, his chief lieutenant. If I was forced to choose between a dead opossum and Frank Newman for a date to Homecoming, I would take the rotting carcass. What a pathetic excuse for a human. All smiles and jokes, but he couldn’t pull a B average if his life depended on it.

I took the seat to the immediate right of Lauren’s desk, my place of power. We made the arrangement that she would be the beauty and I would be the brains early on. It was admittedly more of a one-sided agreement in her favor. I assumed the role of her right hand so she could live her life and do simple things like finding the best Homecoming dress or spending an afternoon with Michelle and the other popular girls. So long as I was around, she could leave all the heavy lifting and strategic thinking to me.

What can I say? I like ’em happy and stupid. Apologies. Inappropriate.

Speaking of stupid, the target of my latest affections entered the room alongside Katherine Duvall. Ashley looked particularly happy that morning. She was surprisingly not wearing her sunglasses. It must have been a good night if she didn't need to resort to an artificial enhancement for a boost to her endorphins.

After the final bell rang to signify the start of the new period and the last of the kiddies funneled inside the classroom, Ms. Kendall took command. Despite her giving us a test in our first few classes, I quite respected the woman. She wasn't cruel and disinterested like some teachers I have had. I think my perception of her was slightly bolstered by the fact that I never had her as a Freshman. She was notorious for despising Freshmen the moment they walked in the door. Due to my first meeting her during my Sophomore year, we got off to a good start right off of the bat and we never had this initial mutual interaction.

The other reason I liked her was she was extremely gullible. I needed that type of personality for my little scheme to work.

"If you can't remember an answer, just skip it and come back to it later," Ms. Kendall said as she gathered a stack of tests from her desk. "If you finish early, you can go do whatever you want so long as you remain quiet. If you run out of time, tough luck. It's supposed to show how much you remember from last year so try to remember something from a bit further back than what you ate for breakfast this morning."

Despite her passive aggressive demeanor, I was admittedly amused by her style of humor. How many times could you give this speech throughout your career without adding some spice to it to make it worth repeating time and time again? I simply could not bear that level of repetition.

"Fantastic advice as ever, Ms. Kendall," Frank said with his idea of charm. "And may I say you look absolutely stunning this morning?"

Ms. Kendall stepped in front of his desk and smiled at him. She made sure he was in the front of the class so she could keep an eye on him. "Aren't you sweet?" She dropped a stack of tests onto his desk for him to pass around. "Don't get a paper cut."

Frank chuckled and passed the tests back to Spencer, who sat behind him. Making sure Ms. Kendall wasn't looking, Spencer made a "jerking off" motion and made sure to have the invisible phallus finish all over Frank's face. Frank smiled and flashed him the middle finger.

Katherine, who sat in front of me, handed me the stack with a smile. I gave her a smile of my own, took my test, and passed the others back to whoever was sitting behind me. Some transfer kid. He had a dirty blonde mullet. Jesus Christ.

Ms. Kendall sat down at her desk and went straight to the computer, presumably to play a round of Internet poker. She was one of the few teachers who did not keep a constant eye on us to prevent cheating. Knowing the relationships between teachers and students could be extremely beneficial. I knew exactly which kids in this class are teacher's pets and will rat on their classmates for a small boost to their grades. Jasmine Jackson, this admittedly beautiful girl with dark ebony skin, was Kendall's personal snitch. I hold a deep hatred for those who rat on their peers. If you have an issue with someone for their actions, say it to their faces. Don't go behind

their backs and cry to an adult to get revenge on them. She may be pretty, but she should get the Pussy Bonpensiero treatment for being a filthy little rat.

My special little friend had a very special little routine she follows every morning on the dot, save those when she is far too inebriated to handle this morning ritual. Ashley arrived bright and early every single morning to begin her day. She did this to avoid her lapdogs and yes-men for a brief moment and have some alone time with the mirror. This allowed her to assess the damage from the night before and make herself somewhat presentable for her peers. The Queen needs to look the part, after all.

Ashley got herself a custom lock for her locker that only she knows the combination to. The combination is 10-14-18, the date she and Lauren became a couple. Lauren admitted this after a night of drinking some of her dad's most expensive wine. I remained quite sober and managed to extract a number of Ashley's secrets from her while she was unable to resist telling me. Lauren is a giggly drunk. It's cute.

After days of observing Ashley's behavior over the course of the school day, I came to a simple yet potentially extremely effective solution to my problem. See, Ashley has the small habit of being lazy and forgetting to zip up her backpack. I could glance back and see her bag hanging wide open in most classes. I was truly shocked that the school allowed us to carry our backpacks around with us as though it were a college campus. I thought they were doing away with that in the wake of Columbine, Sandy Hook, Stockton, Stoneman Douglas, I could go on.

I took my time with my test. I made sure I was correct on as many questions as possible. Lauren offered to let me cheat off of her, but I declined. I do not need to resort to cheating like some people around this dump. Most importantly, I made sure to time myself so I would finish exactly as Ashley did. Ashley did a triple check of every single answer to be sure she finished them all and did so correctly. I could tell it was her by the swishing of papers as she flipped through the packet. I pride myself on my hearing. I could not risk a glance back. That would have given away the game.

Ashley had her backpack dangling in one hand and the test in the other. She was walking slowly, methodically. She was making absolutely certain she finished every question and did not leave any errors she could plainly see before she was allowed to leave the room and screw around with her buddies. How Ms. Kendall got away with letting teenagers leave class after a test baffles me. These people do not deserve trust.

I could hear her just one desk away from me. I took a deep breath and grasped the test in one hand while gripping the folded up paper in my other and prayed no one could see it. Pretending to be in a hurry to stand while my face was buried in the test, I lunged to my feet and collided with Ashley. She smacked right into me. Ashley, in a panic, dropped her test and overflowing backpack. The contents spilled all over the floor. Books crashed around, pencils and pens bounced beneath the feet of the people sitting around us. Everyone was staring at us. It was utter chaos. How could anyone see me drop the slightly opened piece of paper into the mess?

"Watch where you're going, asshole!" Ashley exclaimed. A little rude, but I suppose I deserved it.

“I’m so sorry!”

Ms Kendall gasped when she heard the commotion and rose to her feet to check on us.
“Are you alright, Ashley?”

“I’d be better if *someone* would pay attention,” Ashley said as she dropped to her hands and knees to pick up her scattered belongings. Fitting, really. It’s the one place she’s actually good at something.

Ever the altruist, I bent down to help pick things up and Ms. Kendall assisted. As we grabbed papers and made stacks, I watched closely from the corner of my eye. Ms. Kendall was the largest fish I had ever tried to catch. I just hoped she would take the bait.

I sang a song of joy when she took the cheat sheet in her hands. Before handing it over to Ashley, she gave it once-over. Then she read it even closer. Her eyes gave away her disappointment. She clearly wasn’t angry. Rather, she was hurt.

“Ashley, when you get this cleaned up, wait outside for me.” It was not a request.

“Um... okay?”

Poor girl had no idea what was coming. A pity.

I handed my test in and beat a hasty retreat. I never got a look at Lauren’s reaction to the whole thing. She’d be furious if she knew what I did. That only makes it even more exciting. I passed by Ashley in the hallway while she waited for Ms. Kendall to speak with her. We made brief eye contact, sharing our mutual disdain for one another. I scurried off before she could put the pieces together. As I turned the corner, I heard the door shut behind Ms. Kendall before she began speaking with Ashley. If only I could be there to listen in.

God, I love being me.

Ashley

That little bitch. I swear to God, I'm gonna fucking kill her one day.

After the others were done with their tests, Ms. Kendall took me towards the main office without saying one word to me. I could tell she was upset, but I had no idea why. It's not like I chose to run into Beth or anything. Was she really mad at me for accidentally interrupting a test? That would be such bullshit.

She asked me to wait on the bench outside his office while she spoke to him. I was stuck on the bench where losers and burnouts are forced to sit and wait for their suspensions. I felt like I was lost in the middle of Baghdad. A stranger in a strange land. I don't belong here. What did I do wrong?

Imagine my fucking shock when they called me in and showed me a cheat sheet full of potential answers to the bio test.

After O'Reilly read me the riot act on how cheaters never prosper and blah blah blah, I spoke in my defense. "I don't know how that got there, I swear! That isn't mine!"

"I really want to believe you, Ashley," he admitted while shaking his head, "but I have the paper right here and it fell out of your backpack. My hands are tied."

"But that's not even my handwriting! I *never* use cursive!"

To her credit Ms. Kendall wasn't convinced that I would do this and actually stood up for me. Despite being the one to turn me in without even talking to me first, she was just doing her job reporting it. I could respect that. She was always nice to me, even as a Freshman. "She isn't lying. She never used cursive in my classes before."

"Maybe she used it this once to throw us off if she got caught?"

Oh, for fuck's sake. Really? Are you that desperate to punish someone?

"Mr. O'Reilly, my cursive sucks," I exclaimed. "I can bring in an old paper and show you what it looks like if you don't believe me. Or... hand me that pen right now and I'll do it right now. Tell me what to write and I'll try my absolute best."

"Just tell me why it showed up with all the other papers that fell out of your backpack."

I couldn't believe this was being pinned on me. Of all the people in the world, *I* was being blamed for this. I've never cheated before in my life! I was trying to become Valedictorian next year. I don't need to cheat to do that. But someone drops their cheat sheet and it just so happens to end up in my pile of stuff? What kind of bullshit luck is that? And now, because they need someone to punish, they chose me. I was the convenient sacrificial lamb. They'd make an example of me early on so no one else would cheat throughout the year. What bullshit.

But then it hit me.

The accident. The pile. Ms. Kendall just *happening* to find it among my things.

It took everything in me to not grab O'Reilly's letter opener and cut that little bitch's throat right then and there. She was trying to pin this on me?! That pathetic weasel. That little pale gutter slut. I swore from that day on, I'd make her life a living Hell. She'd already decided

she hated me and I tried to be the better person by just ignoring her after everything that went down last year because I did feel bad for how things turned out, but I was done playing nice.

Fuck her, I hope she fucking dies.

Ms. Kendall studied my face from the seat opposite O'Reilly's. "Ashley? You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I curtly responded, sitting up all in my seat to show I would not back down. "If bringing in another paper showing that my cursive has not gotten any better will be enough, I'll do that. Otherwise, I don't feel comfortable talking without my mother present."

Ms. Kendall sighed. "Jim, it's just a test to see if they know the material we'll be covering this year. I can ask around and see if anyone knows who made the cheat sheet. I really don't think she did it."

Despite O'Reilly's initial expectation on a united front against the evil little cheating mastermind, he found himself outnumbered. He sighed and relented. "Alright, bring in the paper and we'll ask around and see if anyone else dropped it by mistake. But remember that we take cheating very seriously around here."

Fuck you.

I nodded and went to receive my late note from the secretary, Ms. Rose. I thought smoke would be coming out of my ears, I was so mad. I could feel my skin absolutely burning. If that bitch thought I wouldn't figure this out, she's got another thing coming.

The next hour and a half seemed to last a lifetime. I didn't pay attention at all during my Economics class. How could I? I was ready to slaughter that pig. I'd never been so angry in my life. But despite my rage, I was busy hatching a plan of my own. As soon as we were sent to lunch, I hurried out to catch Lauren before she could return to her class from her lunch period.

"Did you know?" I immediately regretted it as I more or less screamed it in her face. I forced myself to turn my volume down so no one else could hear.

"Did I know what?" She clearly wasn't in on it. I figured as much.

"That your *special friend* tried to get me expelled," I growled back.

"Ash, calm down."

Seeing that other people were coming, I took Lauren's hand and dragged her to the nearest girls' room. Once we got inside, I began checking stalls to see if anyone else was in there with us. I couldn't have anyone else hearing this.

"What's gotten into you?!"

After kicking in two stall doors, I started talking. I couldn't hear anyone in the room with us and I couldn't stop myself from releasing some of the rage inside of me.

"Beth made a cheat sheet for the bio test and tried to make Kendall think it was mine."

Lauren actually laughed. I really don't blame her. It's as petty and stupid as it sounds. "Why would she do that?"

I turned from the stalls and stared directly into her soul. "Because she's a manipulative bitch who wants to get me expelled."

"I really think you're overreacting, Ash," Lauren assured me. "Beth wouldn't do that."

She was so innocent. She couldn't see that she was dating a monster. I'm obviously no saint, but fuck me if I'm ever even remotely anything like this girl. If I was ever like her, I deserve to die in a fire. I'll light it myself.

"I really don't get what you see in her," I admitted as I continued checking stalls. "And I really don't get how you don't see how evil she really is. All the awful jokes about me. All the harassment. Does she get off being so cruel? Does she treat *you* this way?"

It took a moment before she finally responded. I only had three stalls to go. If anyone was inside, they were in for the show of their lives. At this point, I didn't care.

"Is that what this is about? You're jealous of her?"

I was already full to bursting, but this sent me over the edge. If it was anyone else, I would have slapped them. But for the love I have for this girl, as fucked in the head as she may be, I forced myself to only scream. "WHAT?! I don't care about you and her—"

Lauren's eyes went wide and she glanced back at the door to see if anyone was coming. "What are you doing?" she whispered as loudly as she could before it stopped being considered a whisper. "Be quiet!"

I was done being quiet. *Fuck you if you're going to be so blind.* "Why? Are you worried everyone will know that you're hooking up with her in your car during football games? You get to date the world's most petty bitch and you get to be happy and everything is perfect. You just have it *so hard*. Aww, poor you!"

Lauren's panic turned to anger. I hit a massive nerve. "Don't you *dare* call her that."

"*She* tried to get me expelled," I reminded her. "Fuck her. And fuck you for falling for such a piece of shit human being."

The words bounced off the walls and back into my mind. I regretted them as soon as they left my lips. There was a reason why she left me. This only proved she was in the right. How could she love someone who speaks to her in this way?

"I get it. You're mad that we ended on a bad note and I moved on. Grow up, Ashley."

She wasted no time storming out. I swore I saw her about to cry, but maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part. I knew I was going to break down soon. I had to get out of there. Somebody had to have heard all the yelling. If someone saw me crying, they'd ask questions. What could I possibly say to get them off my back?

I slammed the side of my fist as hard as possible into the metal stall door. I thought I broke it for a second. I had to get out of there.

Tracy

I waited until I was absolutely sure they had left before stepping out of the last stall to be sure I was finally alone. My jaw was on the floor. I couldn't believe what I just heard. Ashley and Lauren were gay and were once in a relationship and Lauren was currently dating Bethany Hill. And apparently Beth tried to screw over Ashley and get her expelled?

Even though I was missing valuable lunch time, I sat in silence in the stall. I wasn't hungry anymore. My brain was hyperfocused on every single word that they said to each other. I had to be absolutely sure I remembered everything as it went down. I thought I was going to be in the middle of an actual fight between two of the girls, but instead I just learned three deep dark secrets. If I wasn't there to hear it, I'd never believe it was true.

Now that I'd heard it firsthand, it all made so much sense now.

The events of the student council meeting played over in my mind after I was done reflecting on the fight between the ex-lovers. Then I thought about every other time they asked me to do stuff for them. Steal alcohol from gas stations and supermarkets. Give them my homework to copy off of. I was their toy, their slave. They never thanked me or repaid me for sticking my neck out for them. They just said "*We won't forget this*" or "*You're really cool*" and then never brought it up again.

Rage filled my heart. They made my mouth fill with bile just thinking about them. They deserved nothing but shit for how they were making me hurt Kate.

I regretted what I was going to do, but I wasn't going to let this opportunity pass me by.

Beth

Fully anticipating Ashley to squeal like a pig to Lauren in a vain attempt to make me look bad, I wasted no time making myself presentable. My locker was beside hers. We managed to make a trade with the guy who originally owned the locker for twenty bucks. It was a purchase I was more than willing to make if it meant getting to spend more time with her, even if it was a platonic thirty seconds between classes. If we can't have normal dates during football games and lunches and all the other stuff the straights get to do, we took our wins where we could get them.

Our lockers were also directly across from the girls' bathroom and I got to see everything play out. As soon as Ashley kidnapped Lauren and forced her into that bacteria-riddled hellhole, I had to make sure I was prepared. Despite our being together, Lauren was not stupid. She would know immediately if I was lying to her.

I have held a personal animosity against makeup for my entire life. The most I would do was a bit of eyeliner and lip gloss for a school dance or a date with Lauren if she wanted us to look particularly dolled up that day. That being said, I knew I needed to throw Lauren off her game if she decided to take Ashley's side. If that meant wearing some lipstick, then so be it.

The feeling of the stick of artificially-dyed fish scales touching my lips made me cringe. I hated the texture and the feeling of it clinging to my lips. It made me shutter. Despite my anger, I persisted and had a full coating of red on my rather thin lips. Looking in the mirror I put on my locker door, something I only did because Lauren insisted, I felt like a whole new person. Not exactly Marge Simpson when Homer shot her with the Makeup Shotgun, but not Madonna in her prime either. I had considered using black as it tended to compliment my skin tone, but decided against it. I am by no means a goth.

The sound of the bathroom door opening snapped me to attention. I pretended to continue applying the lipstick as footsteps approached. Only two people were in the bathroom so I had a fifty-fifty chance of being punched in the face. I played the odds and didn't turn around.

"Hey, can we talk?"

It was Lauren. I should play the lottery.

I turned and smiled at her, making sure my ruined face was bright and on full display. "Hey, Laur! Notice anything different?"

She looked genuinely surprised. "You put on lipstick?"

"I was hoping that you and I could go to dinner before the game and I wanted to look my best for you." I gave her a little wink and made sure my voice was dropped down to a whisper. I hoped the allure of a secret rendezvous would be enough to throw her off her game.

"Yeah, totally, but um... look, we gotta talk about something."

It did not.

My smile faded. I made sure I looked like I was horrified she was about to break up with me. It was admittedly a risk I made when conceiving this plan. That her ex would be so convincing that Lauren would have no choice but to side with her and dump me. It was highly unlikely, though, but the risk was there. Again, I played the odds.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, no, I’m fine,” she assured me, her eyes darting around the floor and the lockers behind me. “But I just talked to Ashley and she said some pretty bad things about... you...”

“Ashley trash talking me?” I chuckled a little. “Should I sound surprised? She hates me.”

“That’s kind of why she talked to me,” she said, even more hesitant to speak. “She said you made a cheat sheet and tried to frame her in bio and wanted to get her expelled and—”

“Woah, woah, woah, wait a second, wait,” I cut her off and stared at her like she was a moron. She is by no means a moron. Just gullible. “Why would I do something like that?”

“Look, she was saying some stuff about you and it was all really bad and—”

We were interrupted by a loud scream of pure frustration coming from the bathroom. Barely a second passed before the door swung open and Ashley stormed out. She gave us a glare before grunting and storming off like a child. I must admit, I almost burst out laughing. Seeing her break her composure was the most delicious thing I had ever seen.

“What’d she say?” I asked, patiently pressuring her to speak up. If whatever they discussed in that bathroom was bad enough to make her explode like a bomb, it must have been eating her alive by now. Lauren was not one to hold secrets, I learned that a while ago.

“It isn’t important.” Lauren realized she shouldn’t have said this and tried to backtrack. I was not about to let this happen.

“No, I feel like I should know what she says if she’s talking shit about me to you,” I said, now starting to add some pressure to her. One more push should be all it took to get her to give up and just tell me already.

“I’ll tell you tonight before the game. Just please stay calm until then. Okay?”

Realizing I would need to be patient for but a few hours, I nodded my head. Lauren looked like she wanted to say more, but couldn’t bring herself to. I stepped beside her and nudged her along with me like I was a sheep dog and she was my flock. She tended to follow where I lead when she wasn’t in “popular mode” and didn’t feel like thinking for herself. I was fine with her leading me around. If she’s happy, I’m happy. But being able to get her to listen to me and just trust me was always better.

She just needed some faith in me. That’s all I asked.

We were about to walk away when I took one last look back in the general direction of the bathroom. My heart stopped when I saw the door open and Tracy Summers stepped outside.

Let me give a little background on Tracy Summers because she is an interesting case study.

Light brown skin. Pretty enough. Maybe 5’2” or so, just around my height. I’ve always been bad at guessing heights. She was named Secretary for our beloved ex-President Charles Bruxton and she did her job very well apparently, despite actually being elected as a Class Representative for the Sophomores. Some people say it was after Spencer pleaded her case, others say it was Ashley, and some say Charles just liked her ass and wanted her around more. Who can really know for sure?

Despite allegedly sleeping her way into the position, a rumor anyone with two brain cells could figure out was untrue, she did not possess the backbone or social skills to actually make any friends in the student government chamber. Hell, she barely spoke to anyone in the cafeteria either. If she did, it was not more than a few sentences. I was paired with her during a group project on the Seven Years' War in our European History class.

This was where I learned the truth.

Her home life was terrible. Her dad had recently passed away while he was in jail and her mother left the family when she and her brother were very young. Her brother had to work three jobs to afford to keep their little house and feed her dinner each night. She had to take a job that would hire teens just so she could afford lunch. I could tell she was still reeling from the loss and took it upon myself to do the work she could not. She thanked me once it was all over and never spoke to me again afterward. I didn't blame her for not doing the work. She deserved a break.

She got the Class Rep job because enough people knew about what happened to her that they banded together to get her the job, a rare case of altruism around here that did not result in repayment. Tracy just kind of got the job and went about her life with the added responsibility, never once complaining.

Her popularity died soon after, however, as she stopped being a charity case in the eyes of our classmates and she never attempted to befriend the people who helped her. Her alleged involvement in the Homecoming Incident is much more widely known by anyone who played citizen detective and tried to get to the bottom of it, myself acting as the lead investigator. She would never admit her part in the scheme if approached, but people talk.

I personally blamed her as much as any of them. Her alleged involvement still did not yield her any true friends or gain her any influence in the Kara Alderman regime, though. And if you cannot make friends, people will get bored and find new friends.

It did not help matters that she was serving as an elected official in the ill-fated Bruxton Administration that fell to shambles amid the scandal. The rumors of her alleged sexual relationship with Charles that got her the unofficial Secretary job lived on following her own election until his own scandal overshadowed them. The entire student council chamber was filled with jocks and neanderthals who did not care about the school if it did not help their personal egos and popularity thrive. They disgraced the political system just by breathing. Charles' downfall was a mercy to us all.

Tracy was trapped among those airheads and their sycophants for a full year and even I lost track of her. She didn't become relevant in my life again for another few months.

I decided to pursue the political field toward the end of Sophomore year after everything went to hell. Meeting Lauren and realizing she was the only good thing about this place was a very happy accident. I wanted what's best for her and this was the way to achieve it. Becoming President was the only way.

I had considered simply having Lauren unseat Tracy as a Class Representative to get onto Student Council, as she was undoubtedly going to attempt to run again to keep her college applications all bright and shiny, and Lauren's overwhelming popularity would have caused the

easiest victory since Reagan in '84 in what is normally a position that is just handed out like candy to anyone remotely popular that wants it. But that decision would be comparable to choosing to be a pro-bono attorney when you could become Texas' Attorney General. And most importantly, it would not solve the overarching problem of Spencer's enablers continuing to hold power in the room. Frank, Tom, Brad, Ashley, Casey, Heather. They all needed to be destroyed along with their simple-minded puppet master if Lauren and I were to ascend to our rightful place atop the school hierarchy.

I was left with no choice but to snuff out the fire at its source. Spencer Barnett had to go.

Tracy saw that I was watching her from over Lauren's shoulder and immediately turned away, retreating to the safety of Katherine Duvall, who was headed in our general direction. She stopped her and began to whisper something to her. No doubt spilling the beans on what she had overheard in that bathroom. It was now imperative that Lauren tell me everything so I could find a way to fix this situation in my favor.

Though I do not consider myself an anxious person, my stomach began to form knots as I worried over what rumors Tracy would be spreading now that she was the only wildcard in the scenario. And I worried about Katherine. What influence did Tracy have over her? I did not realize they were friends. This whole situation had become so much harder.

I walked Lauren back to class. We smiled to each other, hers a sad smile filled with stress and remorse. As soon as she was gone, I began to formulate my plan of attack. This was a cancer that I could not allow to spread.

Ashley

The school tried to fuck me over, Beth tried to fuck me over, and now even Lauren was trying to fuck me over. I felt so worthless. Nobody was willing to listen. All these assholes were out to get me. Seeing those two together made me sick, but knowing Lauren was on her side was even worse. Fuck them and fuck everyone else.

My nails dug into my palms. I didn't care if it was going to bleed. I could sense every little detail about my surroundings. Lauren's ugly fucking posters. Cafeteria menus. Words of encouragement written in bright letters from the teachers. Fuck all of them. They can all shrivel up and fucking die.

The doorknob of the Student Council Chamber was cold. I turned it and forced my way inside. I found exactly who I was looking for. Student Council had meetings every other day and Spencer wanted to rush this meeting so the guys could get out early and get dinner together before the game later that night.

All eyes were on me. I knew I looked like shit. That was exactly what I wanted.

"That bitch tried to fuck with me," I spat. As sad as it made me to actually talk about my problems, I needed these people to take me seriously. If I cried, they'd feel sadness and sympathy. I needed to be the embodiment of pure fucking rage.

"What bitch?" Frank asked as he was about to take a bit of his sandwich.

"Beth."

"The little pale girl that hangs out with Lauren?" Brad asked, surprised that she of all people wanted to pick a fight with me. "What'd she do?"

"She tried to get me framed for cheating in Bio." It was the cheapest way of getting back at someone I had ever seen. I can be petty, but I don't try to get people expelled just because they annoy me. She was such a little snake.

"Hey, hey, slow down," Spencer calmly said as he walked over to me. "What do you mean she tried to get you expelled? Did you talk to Kendall about it?"

"Yeah," I answered, annoyed he wasn't acting like a *protective boyfriend* who would rearrange someone's face for messing with their girl. I don't care that we technically broke up, he was still dating me as far as anyone else was concerned and I needed a friend. "And she dragged me to O'Reilly's office and he threatened me if I ever *cheated* again. It was such a load of shit, I had to threaten to get my mother and her firm involved just so they would drop it." They were all looking at me like I was insane. "It wasn't me! The little freak framed me and now *I'm* the bad guy for doing *nothing*!"

They looked around at each other for a long time, deciding what was best. I knew it was stupid. It was *so stupid*. And it was bullshit. And now I might get expelled because I "cheated" in one of my favorite classes? I love science! Why would I fucking cheat? How can they accuse *me* of all people of cheating?!

"We can't let her get away with this," Tom finally said.

Tom was the most level-headed of the crew who followed Spencer around. Casey had the biggest crush on him and after he stuck up for me, I fell for him, too. Hearing him speak up was almost as influential as Spencer speaking up would have been. If Frank had said something, Spencer might have played Switzerland and tried to de-escalate, but if Tom of all people is offended then you *know* it's serious.

"Agreed," Spencer confirmed. He looked pissed now that he had really grasped the situation in his mind.

The door opened behind me and Tracy stepped in. She looked around the room and I can only imagine that from her point of view, it looked like she thought she was walking into the meeting before a gang war broke out in the middle of a street.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Beth tried to get me expelled," I answered. She wouldn't be of much help, but I wanted everyone to know what kind of person Beth Hill was. "We're gonna make her pay."

"Wait, hold on, she did what?" Tracy looked mortified. She was a pretty good person. I'm glad she cared.

"Wouldn't it be better if we did nothing?" Brad asked.

Where Tom was the most levelheaded and Frank was the most rash and quick to act, even if the action was dumb and poorly thought out, Brad Kendrick was a sort of wildcard middle. He usually just fell in line and did as he was asked. Usually.

Standing at a towering 6'5" and being built like a freight train, he was more of a statue than anything. I remember when I first started high school. This brickhouse of a Sophomore was the talk of the school. He was only around 5'9" when he was a Freshman and he got the mother of all growth spurts between Freshman and Sophomore year. He finished his Sophomore season being voted as an All-State player, one of four the school produced that year. Now a Senior, he served as Captain of the defense, which makes him a subordinate to Spencer, but still a Captain nonetheless.

Spencer said he was looking at Alabama for college ball. Go big or go home, I guess.

Brad was the team's unofficial enforcer. If the guys needed something done, they went to him. When this dirtbag football player from Davey Crockett Prep leaked the nudes he got from Victoria Falco and turned her into the school slut, the guys had Brad go over to the kid's house and fuck him up. Brad snapped his arm in half and knocked three of his teeth out. *Allegedly*. It helped that they were playing DCP the next week for our Homecoming Game and the guy was their star receiver. But what was he gonna do? Go to the cops and say, "Look officer, the reason the guys beat me up is because I distributed child porn and someone got revenge for it?"

Poor guy slipped on a bar of soap, I guess. Darn fuckin' shame.

Spencer didn't condone it, but he wasn't about to let one of us get bullied like that. He even spoke up for Victoria when some Seniors made fun of her in the cafeteria. Even though they could have kicked his ass, they didn't dare stand up to their quarterback. That was the first time I ever really noticed him as a person and not a football player.

I don't condone the use of violence against most people, but that sniveling piece of shit had it coming for what he did to Victoria. Brad was justified in bending his arm like a rubberband.

Hearing that Brad did not want to do anything worried me. If the guy who could rip Beth's head off like she was a Barbie doll didn't want to get involved, why would anyone else?

"Why would we do nothing?" Spencer asked, noticeably frustrated. "Nobody does that to my girlfriend and gets away with it."

Even though we had our talk last night, we were still technically "together" around the school and I must admit, I felt a little giddy hearing him stick up for me like that. Not in a romantic way, though. It was just nice to feel like someone cared. I gave him a soft smile to silently thank him for his support. It lasted only a moment because the pure rage I had inside of me took hold once again and I wanted to punch a wall until my knuckles bled.

"What if she tried to do this to you?" I asked Brad, building on the support Spencer and Tom gave me. "Or Frank? Or Spencer?"

"Look, if she did this, she's an asshole and deserves to be fucked with," Brad said, "but if we try something and we mess up or get caught, we look like the bad guys. It's your word against hers and we could all get in trouble for something they can't prove she did."

It was an unspoken rule around that school that we never mention the DCP incident. I almost broke that rule so I could shame him into helping. I nearly bit my tongue off from biting it so hard in a desperate attempt to let sleeping dogs lie.

"So we don't mess up," Tom said, coolly. I wondered if he was trying to impress Casey, who was sitting a table away from him. He was never this protective or macho before.

"What do you suggest?" Brad was almost humoring him to come up with something on the spot. He thought it was ridiculous that we'd even try something. What a hypocrite.

"I don't know," Tom angrily responded, "but I'm not doing nothing."

"Me neither," Frank finally chimed in.

Brad shook his head. "I'm trying to talk you out of burning her house down right now 'cause that's what it sounds like you all want to do. We have more to lose than gain in this situation. That's just my opinion. If she did this, fuck her, let's get her ass. But we can't be so obvious about it or we're all toast. Just my thoughts."

"You're not wrong," I said. He wasn't. "Whatever we do, we need to be quiet about it. Nobody can know."

The bell rang, signaling the end of the half-hour period we got before the day ended. The halls began to fill with thousands of happy students ready to go home and play video games or drink or get ready for the game later. I was not a happy student and I now had to go home, get ready for the game, and put on a happy little ray of sunshine face while that little rat was sitting in the benches a hundred feet away.

"We'll talk about this later," Spencer announced. "I'll meet you guys in the locker room. Ash, meet me at my locker."

I nodded my head and exited the room, entering the sea of faces I wanted nothing more than to get as far away from as physically possible. Whatever we were going to do, whatever Spencer decided was best, I wanted done as fast as possible. She was not going to get away with this. Not by a fucking long shot.

Tracy

Being the only one in the room who knew exactly what was going on was the single-most suffocating moment of my life. Everyone around me wanted blood and I could have ended things just by coloring in the blanks they had yet to fill. But would I? Absolutely not.

It's none of my business what people like Ashley and Lauren and Beth do behind closed doors. I have absolutely nothing wrong with gay people. Why would I? What I have a problem with is the idea that I could end this whole thing by outing Ashley. It's clear she doesn't want this secret to go public and I wasn't about to ruin her life just to end the petty rivalry she has with Beth. I knew they hated each other from what happened Sophomore year, but I never knew it was this toxic.

Now the entire football team was ready to march on Beth's house and burn it down. All because Ashley told a little half-truth that was missing a third of the details and context. What I heard was very cut and dry. This isn't just one person being angry; it's a two-way street.

When Spencer dismissed us from the Student Council office, I thought my heart was going to explode in my chest. I somehow managed to not be found out when they acknowledged my being late and again when I lied through my teeth when Ashley told me the news. It wasn't really acting as I was still in shock. I deserved an Oscar for how well I played that, honestly.

I hurried through the hallways and outside to the parking lot. I had to get as far away from here as possible. My brief meeting with Kate outside of the bathroom drew the attention of Beth. I nearly puked when she saw me exit that bathroom. She had to know that I knew everything that was going on in there. I just hoped I could reach Kate first and explain what was going on. She was really concerned when I told her we needed to talk later.

Kate was sitting on a bench underneath a tree. Not *the* tree, thank God. I didn't need *him* listening in. I approached her and sat down without a greeting. She could tell just from looking at me that I was in a bad place mentally. "What was going on back there?" she asked, skipping the formalities. "You looked like you saw a ghost or something."

"I overheard Ashley and Lauren saying some stuff and..." *How do I phrase this without it sounding neither petty nor unimportant?* "And I think Ashley wants the guys to go after Beth. She really hates her. Like, *really* hates her."

"What? What for?"

I proceeded to give a condensed version of the story that did not mention the following details: all three of the girls are gay, Lauren and Beth are a couple and Lauren is Ashley's ex-girlfriend, and Ashley and Beth's rivalry is based on this fact and Lauren was stuck in the middle. It wasn't that hard as the topic of the forged cheat sheet was more than enough of an excuse to explain Ashley's rash behavior. I can understand wanting to get back at her for pulling a stunt like that, but it looks really bad on Ashley's part when you consider the entire story. I wonder if Spencer even knows the truth...

“Whatever they are planning to do to her is going to be big,” I finished. “Not some dumb shaving cream in her locker or teepeeing her house kinda thing. Spencer was fuming that she was treating her like this and now he’s going to stick up for her no matter what.”

“That’s kind of sweet,” Kate said rather wistfully. “Him sticking up for her.”

“But if it goes too far, everyone that knows about this is going to get punished,” I carefully reminded her. “That goes for me as well.”

“Are you going to report it?”

“I can’t,” I admitted. The thought crossed my mind for the briefest of moments, but I was the outsider in the room. The only non-popular kid. The sheep among the wolves that they strung around because I was useful to them. This would be social suicide and my last couple years in this school would be hell-on-earth if I snitched. I also considered going to him for advice, but I’d rather eat batteries than talk to him again. Fuck him.

“Well...” She was trying her best to find a political solution to this. Something where nobody gets hurt and I come out of this unscathed. “Do you think this has anything to do with the election?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t bring it up. But I know these people. Spencer’s friends will do anything to get him re-elected and Spencer will do anything for his girlfriend. So no matter what happens, someone is going to get hurt.”

Kate was dreading this reality. “Shit.”

That was the first time I’d ever heard Kate say anything remotely expletive. It was kind of cute when she swore. Maybe I was just projecting, but she gives off a goody-two-shoes vibe. She wore these sort of business casual outfits to school more often than not. Blouses and skirts. I didn’t know if she would dress differently when the weather changed. Right now, she looked like a secretary or something. Very much Catholic School Chic.

“For right now,” I continued, “let’s just play it by day and see what we can find out. Spencer and Ashley aren’t going to be able to shut up about it until something happens so I’ll be the first to know when something is going to go down. If we can use it to our advantage, great. If not, I’ll keep my head down and we can pretend we know nothing.”

“I just feel bad for Beth,” Kate complained. “She seems nice. To me, anyway.”

I didn’t know the girl personally. All I knew was she was staring daggers into me when she saw me exit the bathroom. Whatever kind of person she was, I was bound to find out. I didn’t let Kate know she may be gunning for me, though. Why spread rumors I can’t back up?

Kate looked down the parking lot and saw a car approaching us. She reached for her backpack that was resting at her feet. “Crap, I gotta go. Will you be at the game tonight? We can talk about what’s going on there.”

“If Beth and Ashley are going to be there, I will. I want to see if something goes down.”

Kate smiled at this. “Somebody loves gossip and drama.”

“It involves me,” I said with a half-smirk. “Of course I want to hear it.”

“Want to get dinner afterward?”

Those words stung me like a hornet. I instantly felt regret. She was being so kind and considerate to me and this new friendship was built on a lie. I could have told her everything right there and she'd probably hate me forever.

"Sure! And I'll see you at the game." I was genuinely happy to spend time with her. For whatever time I had until the truth came out, as I knew it inevitably would, I wanted to enjoy this friendship. "I have to do some stuff for Spencer before I go home."

"Let me know if there's anything juicy we can use!"

Kate smiled and waved one last time as she drove away in her mother's SUV. I wondered if she wanted to introduce me sometime, being that we're friends and all. That was going to be a painful meeting.

I turned and walked back towards the school. By now, Spencer and Ashley's little meeting had to be over and done with. I didn't want to get between them so I took my time walking among the cars. I was about to cross the lot to grab something from my own car when someone stepped out from behind a truck and cut me off. The sun was in my eyes and it took me a moment to realize it was Beth. The sunlight reflected off of her pale skin, blindly me. She almost looked like a vampire.

I tensed up, realizing what was to come. "Oh, um, hi. Beth. What's going on?"

She wasted no time on formalities or pleasantries. "What happened in the bathroom?"

It was an order. Not a request or a question. She wanted me to tell her what I knew, not fill in gaps in the story with my side of it. She knew exactly what was going on. Her girlfriend was there. They had to have spoken at length about it by now.

"I don't..."

She wasn't impressed with my hesitation. "I saw you leave right after Ashley did. You know I saw you. What did you hear them talk about when you were in there?"

"Look, I don't want any trouble," I assured her. "I was listening to music on my phone in the stall and—"

"Don't you lie to me, you backstabbing piece of shit."

My eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"Don't play stupid," she sneered. "I know you're one of Spencer's little yes-men and I know you've taken a sudden interest in Katherine Duvall... what? Less than a week after she decided to run for President. Katherine is a nice girl. I can see why you'd like to be her friend, especially when she's going through a stressful time right now."

How did she...

I had never spoken to this girl before. No wonder Ashley hated her. She really was a massive bitch. "I don't know what you're suggesting right now, but—"

Beth took a step forward, placing herself in between the truck and the car beside it. I took a small step back. She was an arm's length away from me. I could see a flash of delight in her eyes. She was loving this.

"I know everyone on that student council," she explained. "They're all self-serving, egotistical, narcissists who only care about who wants to fuck them. I know you're the last

person any of them would want to be friends with because you're honest and open and the exact opposite of those meatheads and their coked out girlfriends. Did Lauren discuss Ashley's little drug habit in the bathroom?"

It was an open secret that Ashley Williams had a drug problem. Not a weed issue, lots of people smoked around here. Hell, I *dated* the big weed guy and he once said Ashley isn't one of his customers. Ashley had a tendency to get runny noses in class. She could chalk it up to the weather and the dry air, but seeing her wearing sunglasses inside the school every morning was a dead giveaway. I felt genuinely bad for the poor girl. She needed help.

"Ashley isn't all that bad," I pleaded. "I know you and her and Lauren have some kind of history, but she isn't a petty person who would hold it over you if you just talk to her."

This caused Beth to giggle a bit. There was no convincing her. Her mind was made up. "So you know about us then." Again, not a question. She knows exactly what I know. There's no beating around the bush here or bullshitting with her here.

"Beth—"

She didn't let me finish when I tried to explain myself. "I'll be honest with you and say that, yes, I am in a romantic relationship with Lauren Bradshaw and yes, she used to be in a relationship with Ashley Williams. Things ended badly for reasons I will not discuss, as they are none of your business, and ever since they broke up, she has been a jealous pain in my neck who tries to make my life miserable and I give it back to her tenfold. Why? Because I can't stomach anyone who gets in my or my girlfriend's way. I don't like liars, I don't like yes-men, and I don't like stooges who kiss asses to get in with the *popular kids*." She sized me up and flashed a wickedly evil grin. "And from where I'm standing, you're all three, you snake."

There was venom in her voice. She utterly hated me right now. I decided that I wasn't going to take this lying down. Fuck that, I was going to stand up for myself. This girl may be trying to act tough, but I can stand up for myself. "I don't know what you heard or what you *think* you heard—"

"Don't play stupid. Do you really think I don't see what's going on? You just suddenly decide to become her friend when she becomes a threat to Spencer? And come on, I watched you leave the bathroom after Ashley's meltdown. You looked at me for Chrissake. Then I saw you waiting outside the student council office before slipping in and I *heard you* and Katherine making plans to talk about what goes on in that little room."

I was trapped. I realized that now. I only thought so before this, but now I was trapped. I feel like I'm trapped in a hole and a hyena is approaching. Mocking me. Taunting me. I feel helpless right now. I'd never met someone so vile in my life.

Again, she wasted no time speaking again. "So here is what's going to happen next," she informed me, very matter-of-factly. "You're going to do exactly what you've been doing. Stay in good graces with Spencer, be Katherine's friend because God knows she really needs one, and keep selling both of them out to each other. But from now on, you work for me. Anything you tell them, you tell me. Anything they are planning or have on each other, you tell me first. You do this and I'll give you a nice little job on Lauren's staff because you and I both know you'll

never win an election on your own ever again. But keep in mind that if you *ever* tell anyone what you know or even think of telling anyone about this conversation, I will fucking end you. You'll be finished around here. Are we clear?"

That was when I realized what I was really dealing with here. Over the summer, I took a part-time job with a local department store to get my brother and I some extra cash and get my car. I worked in the clothing section and did the menial work of folding the clothes, sorting them, that kinda thing. There's worse jobs out there, I guess.

Taking that job was the only time I can ever remember disappointing Kara, who really didn't speak to me at all during Student Council so I guess I was always doing something right. I guess she was mad because she wanted to keep Student Council together as much as possible, but odds are it was mostly to keep an eye on all of us.

Kara was filthy rich and would probably never have to work a day in her life because of Daddy's money. The thought of us needing to work to help support our parents, who she viewed as nothing more than wallets to be taken from, was earth-shattering to her. She could not comprehend the thought of us not being able to pay for our own food or gas.

My immediate bosses were very chill and easy to talk to. But the store manager was an absolute dick. Talking to him was like speaking to a brick wall. He did not consider anyone's feelings or opinions and just always had to be right. He had these absolutely dead eyes. Like a vulture. He was just a cog in the machine that didn't care that he was just another cog with nowhere to go but back out the door he came in from. He expected the part of the machine he was in charge of to run like clockwork, but contributed nothing but stress and poorly planned ideas and expected praise and ass-kissing for doing so. Covering up all the sexual harassment allegations was testament to that. Can't have an experienced employee get fired for making filthy comments to another coworker. Might slow down production. Anyone working there could place a gun to their heads and blow their brains out and he would only be concerned with why they weren't clocked in that day.

Getting out of that job was the best thing that ever happened to me. He and Kara have a lot in common. Can't say I miss either of them.

Beth had those same eyes that my boss did. Cold. Lifeless. No sense of empathy, no feeling of humanity. Her smiles didn't reach her ears and there was no warmth behind them. You could be starving on the streets and she would only be worried about how it affects her at that exact moment. She won't give you food. She won't give you shelter. She'll expect you to pull yourself up from your bootstraps and get back to business. This girl was made to be in the corporate sector. She was as wretched and evil as Ashley made her out to be.

Bethany Hill is the Devil.

I was at a loss for words. I only managed to mutter a simple, "You are absolutely insane."

My observation fell on deaf ears. It only seemed to amuse her. "Insane and in love." Saying it openly seemed to absolutely delight her. I doubt she'd ever been open about her sexuality before this moment. She had the chance to be open about it with someone for the first time and I could do nothing about it. Except instead of being self-accepting and proud of who

she was, she was just being an asshole. “There’s no worse person for you to be dealing with. Do we have a deal or not?”

She extended her hand. I couldn’t tell if she was serious. I instinctively checked her other hand to see if she was pulling out a knife to cut my throat with. I wouldn’t have put it past her at that moment. She got to say her piece and now I was at her mercy. She could be done with me in moments and nobody would have to know.

I made the life-shattering mistake of shaking that hand. I didn’t know what else to do. All I could do was tell Ashley and Spencer, but what could they realistically do? Wage a prank war? She wouldn’t care about something so petty. Use weedkiller to ruin her lawn and carve giant dicks in the grass? I didn’t know where she lived. Pour piss in her gas tank? She didn’t own a car.

“Excellent. From this moment on, you forget everything you heard in the bathroom and in this parking lot. Things are back to normal. Lauren is my best friend, Spencer is your boss, Katherine is your new bestie, and Ashley is going to overdose by the age of 27. I’m going to the game with my best friend and you with yours. We’ll talk later. My number is in your locker.” Beth flashed me a warm smile and all but skipped away.

Tears began to flow. I was stuck in this Hell I created for myself. I was at the mercy of a teenage sociopath with nowhere else to turn. The reality of the situation really dawned on me as I fell to my knees and began gasping for breath. I’d had anxiety attacks in the bathroom at work before and knew what was coming. I just prayed no one would be around to see me. I couldn’t explain this to someone. I couldn’t put it to words if I tried.

I felt the jagged little rocks littering the pavement digging into my skin. The blacktop was blisteringly hot. I briefly considered the fact that I could develop burns from the blacktop, but brushed the fears aside and pressed my hands and knees down harder and winced. I deserved this. I deserve to suffer. I deserve to bleed. I’m a shitty, shitty person who is hurting a good girl that doesn’t deserve it. This is my fate. I should embrace it. Own it. Let me cry all over the ground and have the tears instantly turn to steam on the smoldering rock.

I’m scum.

Spencer

People say that you should have your entire life planned out by the time you're a Senior. That if you don't have goals of getting into big colleges and don't have exceptional aspirations of being a doctor or lawyer, you're a burnout loser who is wasting your life.

What a load of shit.

I remember in my English class last year, this topic came up during a class discussion. Our teacher, Mrs. P, brought up the issue and we were all tasked, on the spot, with giving a little breakdown of how the next seventy years of our lives were going to play out. Nothing formal, no essay or big report. Just have everyone's eyes on you as you detail how you expect your life to play out. No pressure.

Of course, we had the generic crop of answers: go to med school, go to law school, become a Division-1 rower or basketball player, marry a rich old man and do nothing for the rest of your life, that last one annoying Mrs. P. more than anything. And then there were other things like become a teacher, get married to my boyfriend, get on Broadway, sign their band with a record label. So many futures and so many dreams.

When it came to me, I was stumped. Like completely speechless.

I was in the middle of the rotation to give an answer. Maybe eleventh? I had a couple of minutes to piece together some generic answer like the others, but I couldn't. It physically pained me that I was so unsure of how to answer this. I was supposed to be the big shot quarterback. I should be able to make decisions on the fly. I should have my future all planned out. Everyone else has their own lives all planned out and everyone has my life planned out for me. Date Ashley, win States, go to Texas, win the Championship, get drafted, Hall of Fame career, retirement ceremony, become a broadcaster or maybe a coach, have kids, watch them grow up and get married and become stars, and die with thousands of fans attending my funeral.

Mrs. P. looked at me and said, "Well, Spencer? How about you?"

Everyone was looking at me. A hundred eyes stared with indifference at me. My entire future was at stake. No time to waste. I needed a plan. I had to say something. I stay up at night thinking about this all the time.

Jesus Christ, just say something, you fucking loser. Come on! What are you waiting for?! It's your turn! SAY SOMETHING.

"I guess something with history or something with video games."

Great answer, dipshit.

Mrs. P. just sorta nodded her head and tried to make sense of the worst answer of the day. "Oh, well... I'm sure you'll find something interesting with history or video games!"

She moved on to the next person without another word. I think he wanted to be an engineer or something. I kinda spaced out after my turn was up and didn't pay attention for the rest of the day. I felt too sick.

For the next couple weeks, the guys on the team called me "Professor Spencer" and asked me to talk about the World Wars or Vietnam or whatever. In our history class, Frank even piped

up in the middle of a lesson and asked, “Why is Spencer even here? He *knows* this stuff already!” It took me three days to actually speak to him again. He didn’t understand.

Immediately after I answered, it really dawned on me how fucked up this whole thing was.

I was still only sixteen. I only discovered Internet porn a few years ago. I hadn’t gotten my first job yet. I wasn’t old enough to vote or enlist. I couldn’t buy booze or cigarettes get into an R-rated movie if the ticket taker asked for an ID. But apparently I was old enough to decide what I wanted to do for the rest of my life? At sixteen, I needed to start making the “hard choices” and determine where I would study, at minimum, for three years after I graduated high school. I needed to be ready for the real world because I was almost old enough to drive on my own and vote and buy cigarettes and alcohol and once that happens, you’re no longer worthy of guidance and growth.

Do adults realize how much pressure a simple question like that can carry? I don’t know what I’m going to be doing after the football season is over, let alone ten, fifteen, thirty years from now. Why should a decision you make in high school define the rest of your life? It’s not like I committed rape or murder. That is the kind of thing that should never be forgotten. It’s being labeled “student loan borrower” and then having a piece of paper with a degree printed on it that thrusts you into a certain place in society where you are all but trapped in or you are labeled a “failure” for not achieving success in that field.

Just like with Ashley and my love life, my professional life was determined for me by the people around me.

I was considered the gifted kid because I could throw a football pretty well in grade school. I attended camp after camp at my dad’s behest so I could learn the game and accelerate my development. By the time eighth grade rolled around, I was the top middle school quarterback in the county. I was on the news, in the papers, being featured in Facebook articles. Can you imagine being a scrawny, acne-riddled thirteen year old and getting recognized by girls from around the state when you go to the mall? I felt like Justin Bieber when I was asked to take pictures with smoking hot high school girls. When he wasn’t a huge douchebag, obviously.

So here’s the thing about high school football: recruiting is illegal. If a high school football program is found to be going out of its way to recruit a student from outside their district to play for their team, they can be sanctioned pretty harshly by the athletic association. From where my house is located, I’m considered in the Arlington City High School District. If I went down my street maybe two hundred feet or so, I’d be outside city limits and end up going to a school in Fort Worth. It’s all very complicated.

If I wanted to go to public school for high school, that was where I was destined to spend four years of my life. But if you go to a private school, so long as you can get there, you can technically go wherever. My one neighbor, Shaun, commutes for forty minutes to go to St. James. He was a big soccer player for them.

Being the star prospect quarterback, I got more than a handful of... what’s the legal term for offers? Invitations? I got several *invitations* to visit the local private schools that happened to

have strong football programs in need of potential superstar quarterback. St. James, Arlington Prep, Our Lady Academy. All kinds of religious institutions that totally didn't pump more funds into sports than they did into academics. I was given free shirts and buttons, free lunches and snacks, pamphlets, free books from the libraries that I would never read, and football jerseys from the star players I'd never heard of. It was like I was at a convention or the Oscars or something. Everyone wanted to be my friend for some odd reason.

When I visited one of the schools on my list, St. Francis, I met the principal's daughter, Caroline. The school was a K-12 institution and we would be classmates if I chose to go there next year. She was pretty tall and had curly blonde hair and freckles. She was also seventeen. I'd had crushes before, but nothing like this. My thirteen year old brain was in love. She took me to the mall and we went to the park and went mini golfing. She was my first kiss and after I said so, she winked and promised I couldn't tell anyone. She even offered to give me a blowjob. I was barely thirteen. I was terrified of the idea and just kinda laughed about it. She seemed so relieved when I said no.

She said she really hoped she'd see me there next year and we could hang out all the time. I thought she was going to be my girlfriend forever and we'd get married and have kids and retire happily with a dog or two.

By the end of the year, I decided I wanted to stay local and go to Arlington High. A major decision was Frank saying he was going there. His family simply couldn't afford a fancy private school with a \$15,000 tuition. Even though my dad could easily have afforded it for me, I decided to follow my best friend. To be honest, the thought of being alone was the major motivator in choosing a public school over a private one where I'd get more academic help that I probably need.

That's the mark of a true friend: sticking with their friend over the crazy hot Senior girl.

Caroline stopped returning my calls after I told her about my decision. We never spoke again. It wasn't until I heard about her father being fired for allegedly attempting to recruit major football players from around the county to jump ship and move to Arlington that I realized what was going on. I still feel bad for her to this day. She didn't deserve to be used like that. I wondered how many guys she was forced to blow just so they'd play football for a team that went 5-17 over the course of the next two years before the program more or less collapsed due to enrollment issues.

As soon as I arrived on campus at ACH, I was treated like a star. Sure, I was the pimply Freshman that hadn't worked off the baby fat yet, but people realized I could be somebody. That was all it took to start eating with the Sophomores at lunch and being seen with Juniors and Seniors between classes.

Of course, it was all by invitation only and there needed to be a football player among them for the others to even consider being seen with a dopey Freshman. I was shy, though, and spoke little. I spoke only when spoken to for fear of ruining things. I think that's why the invitations stopped coming and I was left alone with my fellow Freshmen after a few months. It also didn't help that I struggled as a backup during my few moments of playing time in games

and had issues grasping the playbook and offensive concepts that came with the territory of a then-5A high school. Not saying I didn't try, but it was all very overwhelming.

My dad pushed me hard to pursue football as a potential career. It's almost suffocating.

Now I was starting my Junior and Fort Worth Senior High was our first game of the year. They are one of the weaker teams on the schedule. The sportsbooks have us at a ninety-seven percent chance of winning. I'm not the gambling type, but that's one I'd take. We beat them pretty bad my Freshman year and we weren't anywhere near as a complete team as we are now.

Charles was instrumental in me becoming a leader. He was such a talented guy. I still can't believe the accusations were true, but considering he left the school as soon as they came out... I don't know. Once he was gone, it was up to me to save the team. I was only a Sophomore, but I think I handled it well. We didn't make it to States, but we did win one playoff game. That was the best bus ride home from a game I'd ever had in my life.

I couldn't stop thinking about the whole thing with Ashley and Beth. I didn't know the girl personally and I didn't think anyone could do something so mean, but Ashley wouldn't lie to me about this. Was Beth jealous of Ashley and Lauren's history?

Despite everything going on, and for better or worse, I had to put it behind me for the next few hours. Everyone was counting on me to do this. I needed to do well in this game to get into college. Even a small stakes game like this could ruin our playoff hopes. A single loss in this conference could mean disaster for your season. Everyone would hate me if I blew this.

The game was a sellout. Our stadium could hold 13,700 people and the entire grandstand was full. Walking out onto that field with thousands of people cheering you on is an experience that cannot be put to words. It makes you feel small, but also like the universe is in your hands and all you need to do is take it.

With my guys behind me, we charged out of the tunnel and into the sun. The cheerleaders held up a massive paper banner that read "ARLINGTON CITY HIGH TORNADOES" that I proceeded to rip in half as we ran our half-lap around the field and toward our bench.

The game was on.

Beth

Despite my utter hatred of football, and the school in general, football games were a fascinating case study in how the community came together to gawk at teenage boys burning off some steam by ramming into each other in the blistering summer heat.

No, not that way, you perverts. That costs extra.

The parking lot had no fewer than three different barbecues going on and there was the famous “Colonel Charlie’s Cuisine” on the inside of the venue, named for the first coach of the football team who was also a renowned connoisseur of grilled meats. I got myself a plate of ribs and an ear of corn from one of the three food stands which I ate while wasting time before the game with Lauren and her friends. No sauce on the ribs, though. Barbeque sauce makes my stomach hurt.

I did not mind playing the role of “third wheel” while Lauren spent time with her volleyball friends. I was never much of the social butterfly type and preferred to let others speak for me until I had something worth saying. Lauren’s closest friend at the school, besides myself, was Michelle Wilson. Michelle was her Assistant Captain as well as the Captain of the soccer team. She was a very bright girl with a good head on her shoulders. She was a Senior and had been going to school with Lauren since they were in grade school. Lauren was so proud when she said she was being recruited by Stanford for volleyball as well as Stanford for soccer. They are both considered top programs in the nation for their respective programs.

The same could not be said for Casey Harper and Heather Sinclair. These glorified purse dogs spent the bulk of their time attached at Ashley’s hip. A discount Gretchen and Karen. A poor man’s Heather D. and Heather M. Heather wishes she could be a Heather. If they manage to survive college without one another, I will be shocked. They are like parasites feeding off of one another in a symbiotic relationship of shared perfume and lipstick.

Casey and Heather cornered Lauren to discuss the afterparty at Spencer’s house. I was, of course, going to be attending to keep a leash on Lauren. We could not afford any scandals or teenage pregnancies before the election. Not that I believed she would stray, though she was a giggly drunk who did dumb shit when she was intoxicated.

With only a half-hour to go before the game, I felt the need to apply more sunscreen. There were very few clouds in the sky. I felt as though I was melting. When Michelle turned to talk to the other girls, I finally got my chance to speak with Lauren for the first time in almost an hour. I had been dreaming of this moment.

“Nice day out.”

“It’s so pretty!”

She wants me.

Michelle decided to butt in and give her two cents on the weather. “Can the summer never end? Like I hate the heat. It sucks. But I love it.”

“Don’t like the fall?” Lauren asked.

They proceeded to go on about Michelle's allergy to the mold on the leaves and Casey hating the one snowfall per year we receive and how Ashley almost got into an accident during a freak ice storm last winter. I could not have cared less. Not after what she did.

"Don't your allergies get really bad during the fall?" Lauren asked me.

Despite my desire to not be involved in this conversation, I could not refuse a question from her. "If I don't have my inhaler, I can't breathe. Same with spring." It was one of my few open weaknesses, though it kept me from needing to participate in most activities in gym class so I did not mind it as much. I tried to avoid bringing it up.

We entered the stadium with a half-hour to go before the game began. I had done some light reading on the upcoming contest and learned that the Fort Worth team, to put it bluntly, sucked. The team had won five games in three years and was on its fourth coach since I entered high school. A mixture of poor performances, recruitment violations, and a scandal involving underage girls resulted in the program falling apart and the job being all but a career death sentence. If Spencer and his goons found a way to lose this game, I might give myself an aneurysm from laughing so hard in the student section. It would be a noble death.

The Arlington Student Section, affectionately referred to as the "Bleacher Creatures" by those sad souls I am forced to call my peers, had an entire section of the grandstand reserved for themselves. Located behind the western goalpost, the seating was carefully chosen when constructing the stadium eight years ago for a number of reasons I learned one day when discussing the team with Lauren at her house. I considered it to be more of a ranting session.

1. The wind tends to blow from the North-Northwest to the South-South East. This means that any field goal attempts will be given an extra boost if kicked toward our bleachers and lose momentum if going toward the other set of uprights.

2. During a coin flip, Arlington would always accept an outcome where they could kick towards our bleachers during the end of the second and fourth quarters. This meant allowing the opponent to receive the kickoff or choose to kick the ball off, but it was considered a negligible issue. If the opponents chose to go against us, they would be met with the single-most obnoxious fan base in all of Texas. Worse even than the local Cowboys fans because we actually had something to be proud of since Bill Clinton was in office. Sorry, Dallas, but David Akers' speech about your sorry franchise could not be more accurate.

3. If the game came down to a field goal or a scoring drive, the Arlington bleachers would not provide interference for the home team. They would not jump around or make noise or distract the players if they knew they needed to focus.

This was the major reason why the construction was done the way it was. There was a scandal in the early 2000's that resulted in Arlington losing a key rivalry game due to a student from the opposing team shining a laser pointer in his eye. The kicker misses, the play was not reviewed because it is high school football, and Arlington lost.

We as a school are still bitter about "Lasergate" to this very day. Oh, the humanity, I weep each night for the fallen.

Is it legal for a team to rig their stadium's design in the favor of their players? I can only assume not as there has never been an issue as far as I am aware. After all, the Cowboys play in a stadium with a giant glass wall that allows in natural sunlight that effectively blinds the players. My interests are far outside the mundane world of athletics. What happens on the field was of no consequence to me. The only outcome that can have any remotely noteworthy effect on my life was how sad the student body will be at Spencer's party and how much they would blame him for the loss, potentially alienating him from his voters.

Lauren led me through the pathway underneath the main grandstand. I had made this journey five times before the previous year and it still managed to impress me. The arches we pass under while going to our seats, the columns with the names of previous State Championship winners carved into the stone, the fact that it was all enclosed and pumped full of cooled air so we had a place to retreat to if and when we got overheated. I may hate sports, but I do enjoy the occasional architectural wonder. The taxpayers definitely got their money's worth on this one. God bless this state and its obsession with football.

We approached the staircases that lead up to the glass doors, the last barrier between the "Creatures" and their seats. Known as the Creature Cage by the locals, this private circular veranda had merchandise stores and restaurants a'plenty. It was also where the voting for Homecoming Court would take place, though that was weeks away. I still remember that night like it was yesterday. The school even hired bouncers that forbid anyone without a student ID or a written note from the school itself allowing an outsider into our sacred sanctum. We found ourselves entering a wave of hundreds of teenagers trying to get up the steps at the same time. I braced myself for about ten minutes of discomfort.

"I'm going to get us some water," Lauren decided before we got totally surrounded by our peers. It was a good thought. I feared passing out from dehydration. "Want anything?"

"A water or two, please," I said as I took out my purse and reached for money.

"Hey, no worries," Lauren assured me. "I got it."

Between the two of us, Lauren was the rich one. My Mother has money, however it was locked up in trust funds and accounts I could not access until I was an adult so my monthly allowance was currently limited. She was rarely ever home due to traveling for business. Contact between her and the school was more often than not done over the phone.

That was not to say I am rich or anything, but I was not in danger of going hungry while my Mother was away. I could perfectly handle preparing my own dinner and buying the groceries myself. And, of course, there was always takeout.

Lauren, on the other hand, was filthy stinking rich. Her Father and his partners sold his startup tech company to one of the major corporations (I want to say Microsoft, but I could be wrong) for anywhere from \$1.1-\$2.7 billion back in 2003, the largest purchase the company had made till that point and one of their ten largest purchases/mergers since being founded. He also received a large amount of stock in Microsoft as a part of the deal, which had exploded in value since the sale. He has since become a consultant in a number of tech companies in ways that do not interfere with the conditions of the sale of his previous venture.

Needless to say, she never has to work a day in her life.

But Lauren was very private about her family and her wealth. She does not enjoy bringing it up at all if we are being honest. She was more than willing to pick up a check at dinner or loan you money for lunch or get you an expensive Christmas present, but she has not gone so far as to offer to pay my future student loans off for me or buy me a car for a graduation present. I had no doubt she would if and when we are married, but that was years away. I am afraid of commitment, apparently.

I did not envy her wealth. I was more than capable of living a frugal and meager existence, so long as I was left alone with only a select few beside me. I did not choose her as the target of my affections because I am a gold digging whore that wants to bleed her dry and then take the kid in the divorce proceedings. Her money is meaningless to me. While it was nice to know she had a safety net and will always look out for me, I sought other ways to expand my personal wealth and provide for myself, and Lauren by extension. I had a few ideas in mind.

“You girls want anything?” Lauren asked, her debit card already in hand.

Michelle smiled and pulled a water bottle out of her comically large pink purse. “I think I got it covered.” A quick glance revealed that there were four other bottles inside. All the caps had been opened at one point. I could see the little tear between the cap and the plastic hoop beneath it.

“I’m getting you something just to be safe,” Lauren warned.

The paper label was a little bit tattered from repeated use. Lauren’s concern confirmed my modest conclusion that Michelle was pregaming the party for a few hours. I suspected Grey Goose as she was known as the vodka girl in our school and could only have the finest, even if she was sneaking it in a water bottle during a football game. How original.

Lauren left and I was left with Michelle, Casey, Heather, and the volleyball team. I was saved from this nightmare somewhat when Casey and Heather retreated toward the tunnel leading to the girls’ locker room. A security guard verified their IDs and allowed them to enter. Now I was spared an evening of Ashley’s cronies spying on me.

Speaking of Ashley...

“So what’s the deal with you and Ashley?” Michelle asked after taking a sip and coughing a little. “I heard you guys had a fight.”

“Jesus, word gets around fast,” I complained.

“So what happened?”

I saw a few of the volleyball girls around us leaning in to hear us better over the deafening crowd noise. This was one of the many reasons I hate crowds. I cannot hear myself think when hundreds of little redneck wannabes are practically screaming over each other. “She’s mad I’m her friend because she’s still bitter over them falling out,” I explained, half-lying. “Just stupid bullshit.”

“That’s so stupid,” Michelle moaned. “Like, she can choose her own friends.”

Michelle was always extremely mellow. Plus she and Ashley did not like each other anymore so she was an obvious ally that I actually enjoyed talking to. Our mutual hatred of an entitled little Daddy's Girl brought us together despite us otherwise never becoming friends.

"Exactly," I exclaimed. "Why can't I be her friend when you blew your shot with her?"

"She's such a bitch." Michelle rolled her eyes and took another sip, then sighed. "Like don't get me wrong, I used to love her to death, but... fuck. We used to be best friends before her and Kara started hanging out. She's changed so much."

Ashley, Lauren, and Michelle used to quietly rule the Sophomores while the Seniors kept everyone else in line. The status quo was broken when Kara Alderman handpicked Ashley to replace her as Head Cheerleader. Ashley and Lauren continued to date in secret while Michelle grew to hate the girl Ashley was becoming now that she was getting the smallest crumb of power at school. She never caught onto the fact that her two oldest friends were fucking on the regular behind her back.

Obviously the idea of outing her is an angle I cannot and will not ever consider. I am a lot of things, but I would not out a closet gay girl to the entire school for the sake of ruining her life. I could do that perfectly well on my own. Not saying *everyone* would hate her for it, but there were too many variables, too many wildcards. This also had the consequence of outing myself and Lauren, which I also cannot and would not do until we are good and ready.

Giving Michelle the story I want her to hear worked on a number of levels. It made her distrust Ashley even more so she and the other volleyball players would support me and Lauren in the election and she would undoubtedly retell the version of the narrative I wanted to spread. With rumors spreading about my apparent beef with Ashley coming to a head, everyone would want to speak of it and I just told a dozen teenage girls information on the latest gossip. I would get to sit back and let fate take it from here.

Michelle offered me one of the "water bottles." I declined.

"I think I'll stick with actual water."

"Fair," she said. "But if you change your mind, let me know." She was not lacking for refreshment.

We marched up the stairs and were greeted by the blistering sun above and green of the football field below. We made our way to the seats we always sat in toward the front, as the athletes and their friends always get the first few rows, and settled in. Lauren would not return for a little while so I enjoyed the brief moment of being able to stretch half my body out.

When she returned and handed me my bottle of water, I could not help but smile as the sun reflected off of her flawless and slightly tanned skin. She was beauty incarnate. A Greek goddess. We clinked our bottles together and sat back to enjoy the show.

"Thirsty?" Michelle asked, waving the bottle in Lauren's face.

"YES!" Lauren happily exclaimed before taking a long sip.

While I do not condone day drinking, especially by children, I was not going to stop her. She was a big girl and could make her own choices. I knew she was going to be absolutely hammered tonight so she might as well begin pacing herself now. I could only be a helpful guide

for her illicit activities. Like Jiminy Cricket, but with breasts. And also not a bug. So not like Jiminy Cricket whatsoever, I guess.

I was so glad I chose to wear shorts that day. I was already sweating like a pig after fifteen minutes of sitting in the sun. I missed Pennsylvania. Texas is too hot. I knew I was going to live and die on a remote island in the Pacific one day, but that doesn't mean I don't absolutely despise the heat.

Ashley

I was mildly annoyed when Casey and Heather arrived late, but that was the least of my concerns. I always got nervous before the first game of the year, despite this being my third first game. Now that I was Captain, my fears were ballooned to triple the amount. What if someone got hurt or the halftime performance went poorly? What if we got laughed at? What if my uniform rips and I'm stuck in the middle of the field in my underwear? I have had several nightmares.

We barely made it onto the field before the pre-game festivities began. The ceremony was a simple one that deviated little from other teams: The cheerleaders form a human tunnel the players run through and I, along with my Co-Captains, hold up a large banner that Spencer runs through. Some song voted for by the players blares over the speakers to hype the crowd and everyone jumps around and gets into it.

Spencer informed me that, per Coach Mullens' orders, this year's song would be Final Countdown by Europe. It was a fun choice, I guess. Previous songs were from the likes of AC/DC, Journey, Queen, Guns 'n Roses, and other loud rock bands. Last year was supposed to feature the Rob Zombie song Living Dead Girl as the walkout anthem, but apparently some faculty had issue with the lyric "Raping the geek and hustling the freak." Prudes.

However, in the most controversial moment since Charles Bruxton's departure from Arlington, there was a change in music. The older players united and said they wanted something more energetic. Coach Mullens held it to a vote among the team captains and the Nays had it. Spencer, being *the* Captain, was forced to make the call of the new song. He and I spoke at length about potential ideas that Thursday night.

Final Countdown was ultimately replaced with Metallica's Creeping Death, a personal favorite of Spencer's. I'm not sure how they got away with convincing thousands of people at a high school football game to chant "DIE! DIE! DIE!" during the song, especially in today's world, but I guess O'Reilly didn't want to deal with the issue again and let them have their fun. It was kinda fun, all things considered. Very theatrical.

The song began to play and we prepared for the runout. I held the banner high as the crowd began to clap along to the beat and some began to sing along. To my knowledge, there was only one part that they absolutely needed to sing and it came later and Spencer and Frank spent all day educating certain people in the crowd on what to sing and when. As the song picked up, the players began to run out of the tunnel. Smoke machines went off and everyone exploded with ecstasy that football was back on Friday night. We spent more on special effects for the football team than we did for the entire girls' field hockey team.

Spencer split the banner in two and the whole team ran toward their bleachers. Except for Spencer. He broke off into a run and headed for the student section. He was bragging about doing this for weeks now and he finally got to do it. As the song reached the chorus, a select few of the Seniors in the stands looked around to make sure the others were in on it. They sang it loud and sang it proud to get everyone's attention.

When Spencer reached the walls, he removed his helmet and led them just as he intended. “DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!”

Spencer’s smile stretched from one ear to the other. Seeing everyone singing along and having fun was like a shot of heroin to him. Some real fantasy fulfillment after watching old video replays of Metallica concerts on YouTube since he was young. He loved getting people to have fun like this, especially when football was involved. He jogged back to his bench, still grinning like a kid on Christmas.

Seeing him so happy and being so full of life reminded me why I cared about him. Why I willingly chose to date him. I didn’t need to, as much as people would argue to the contrary. I had a choice and I chose him. I didn’t want to be with him anymore, I know that for certain, but as friends? Maybe it could work out after all.

The team captains went out for the coin toss and we began our cheers on the sideline.

Despite my fears, I felt like this was going to be yet another fun season of football. I was really excited to see if we could actually win a State Championship. It would be our first one since 2005. We might have won it last season, but Charles got busted and the team basically imploded without his leadership.

But now Spencer was in charge. He told me that scouts from Oklahoma were in the stands watching him. He said he was nervous about impressing them. I assured him it was going to be okay and Fort Worth sucks. Plus he isn’t being given offers for another year so he has plenty of time to screw up and improve. He doesn’t need to be perfect. He was grateful someone actually gave him advice besides “You’re gonna do great! Just be you and you’ll win!”

I didn’t even think it was that good of advice. Telling someone that their biggest fear doesn’t matter isn’t exactly a sound pep talk. But I’m not wrong. He has all of this year and all of next year to get better. One little mistake won’t ruin him for life.

As the game went on, I was more and more ready for the party. It was going to be wild. I really needed to get high.

INTERROGATION

Beth

I should have known something was really wrong as soon as they called me into the front office bright and early on Monday morning. I did not believe I was in trouble, but anything was possible. It was a very intense weekend. I began to conjure up excuses and alibis as soon as I left my first period class and did the walk of shame through the hallways.

Upon entering Mr. O'Reilly's office, I found both he and Mr. Hardy were together. I immediately feared for the future of Lauren's Presidential campaign as he was in charge of the Student Government and their activities, though he delegated most of the governance to the students themselves and only had to give final say on matters of importance.

My heart sank further when I saw a police officer sitting in the corner of the room. He was staring at me, emotionless, with a notepad in his hands. We locked eyes for just a moment. I am not ashamed to admit I feared what was to come. Not knowing what I was going to be talking about scared the shit out of me, though. I lost my edge.

I sat down in the chair with as much false confidence as possible. I needed to play dumb.

"So are you going to tell us what happened or are we going to sit here until the bell rings?" O'Reilly asked. He always was a douchebag.

"James, come on," Mr. Hardy protested.

That was when I realized I was not the first student called into the office this morning. They looked exhausted, completely burnt out from questioning kids as they came in. I realized this meant they were either looking to throw the book at me specifically or I was just another in a long list of suspects. I chose my words very carefully.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about," I calmly stated, pretending to be the scared little girl who just got scolded by her Principal.

"Don't play games with me, kid," he warned. "We know you and Ms. Williams have a very rocky history. We want to discuss that."

I attempted to piece together in my head why I was called in, today of all days. I was not called in after Ashley blamed me for the cheat sheet so unless these buffoons were woefully slow at their jobs, it had to be about the party. I could talk my way out of the cheat sheet debacle, but discussing the party admittedly scares me. Then I considered the police officer and ruled out the cheat sheet issue altogether. Why involve the law in a forged cheat sheet? A guidance counselor, sure, but not a cop. I knew what they were going to say and it chilled me to the bone. I kept up a strong face, though. I had to.

"We aren't friends, if that's what you wanted to know" I said. "I'm sorry, what is this about exactly?"

"We want to discuss the party," Mr. Hardy explained.

"What party?" Again, I needed to play dumb.

"The one after the football game," O'Reilly said a bit too loudly for my taste.

“There’s at least five parties after a home game, sir. I’m just asking you to be a bit specific as to which one in particular you mean.” Though being confrontational was admittedly a poor choice at the moment, I felt good doing it and it was a win in my book.

O’Reilly angrily sighed and continued on as though he were reading from a textbook he’d read from a thousand times before. “The party at Spencer’s house that took place between nine at night and... I don’t know, early in the morning. The one that several people said they saw *you*, Lauren Bradshaw, and Ashley Williams attending. Do you remember that party?”

“Yes, I did attend this event,” I admitted. Why would I lie when he has witnesses?

He rolled his eyes. “And you saw Ashley Williams at this party?”

“Yes, over the course of the night. I never spoke with her, though.”

“Was she there throughout the whole night?” Mr. Hardy asked.

“Like I said, I wasn’t trying to spend time with her or anything,” I replied. They clearly wanted more so I told them what I knew about Ashley’s partying habits. “From what I’ve heard from Lauren, Ashley likes to hop from party to party if she gets bored.”

“Who else hosted a party that night?” O’Reilly asked the cop, who skimmed through the notepad in his hands.

“There was one at the Grants and one at the Branch kids’ apartment, but nobody said anything about her showing up there,” the cop recited.

“What exactly is going on?” I asked. “She didn’t go home or something?”

“We can’t get into specifics, but Ms. Williams didn’t come home and her mother is worried sick. She called the cops and they’re looking for her. So we’re interviewing people from the party to get a possible location on her whereabouts.”

I believed I was experiencing what is referred to as a victory at that moment. Ashley was missing and they couldn’t find her anywhere. I had more information that they could not get out of me without the use of torture. They weren’t accusing me of any crimes or criminal wrongdoing. All I could tell them was I had not seen her much over the course of the night and I was free to go. The Presidential campaign was safe.

I left the room with a smile on my face.

Spencer

I couldn't believe my ears. How could this be real? She was at the house two days ago. Where could she have gone? What happened to her?

My mind was racing. O'Reilly was staring me down. I could feel sweat forming on my forehead. He figured I had to know *something*. But I didn't. But it was my party so obviously I was to blame for everything. And now the cops were involved and wanted to know everything that happened. If I incriminated myself, the team would be screwed. My future would be over. But I didn't know anything! But would they believe me?

"She's missing?" I finally asked after sitting in shocked silence for what seemed like hours. I wondered if they suspected me of any wrongdoing.

"As far as we know, yes," O'Reilly said fairly softly. "Her friends, Casey and Heather, said she never came home yesterday and she isn't answering her phone. They came to us for help and we, in turn, contacted her mother and the authorities."

"She probably just ran off to stay with a friend or to her grandparents' house and isn't answering her phone," Mr. Hardy said with as much reassurance as he could. "But we wanted to see if you heard anything."

I stared at the desk in front of me. Mortified. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God, this is all my fault..."

O'Reilly perked up, like a detective who just had a break in the case. "Sorry?"

"I should never have thrown that party. Holy shit, this is all my fault!" I could feel myself shaking in the seat but I couldn't stop it. I was tearing up. I never cry in front of people. The idea that I got her hurt or even killed was too much to bear. I should never have yelled at her. It was all my fault she freaked out. Why am I such a fucking idiot?

Mr. Hardy rushed over and squeezed my shoulder. "Hey, hey, hey, nobody's blaming you for anything. It's not your fault."

Everything began to click into place. Every bad thing that happened over the past few weeks. Every conversation, every text, every phone call. I tried to place a moment when she might have admitted she was in a bad place and needed me. There had to be some time when she cried for help. Some time when she admitted she was in a dark place and just wanted someone to be there for her.

And then it hit me. At my house, a week before we went away for football camp at the end of the summer, Ashley was really quiet. I asked her about it, but she dodged the question for a while before finally opening up.

"Sometimes I just feel like I don't belong here," she quietly admitted. "And I want to just... go. Away."

"Why? You're the Captain of the Cheerleaders. You're the most popular girl in school. Everyone loves you!"

"But nobody likes me."

I didn't press the issue. I just let her leave. I told her I loved her, but she didn't respond. I should have realized how upset she really was. God, I was such a dense asshole.

"She talked about leaving a couple weeks ago, but she didn't go into it very much," I told them. "I thought she was just... talking, I don't know." The cop sat forward and wrote something into his notepad.

"Did she say where she wanted to go or anything about it?" Hardy asked.

I shook my head. I was as clueless as they were. My heart was pounding in my chest. I felt like I was going to have a heart attack or a stroke or something. This couldn't be real.

I just hope they believed me.

Katherine

Despite barely speaking to Ashley in my three years at Arlington, I couldn't help but worry for her. Even though Tracy had spent the past week bashing the girl over and over and all the shit she did with the cheerleaders and in Student Council, I didn't hate her. I barely knew her. It's not like she was a war criminal or a rapist or anything. I hope not, anyway. How could I hate someone I went to half my classes with and didn't even know?

I tried to remember the little details of the party as best I could. Anything I could do to help the police would be useful. We did talk for a little while and then we met up with Spencer and then she stumbled off. She didn't say anything that might have clued in that she wanted to run away. She was really upset, sure, but I don't know what could have happened to push her to that limit.

After speaking with her, I can understand why she was so upset.

That was when I realized she could get in trouble if I told them how bad she got at the party. She got *really* drunk that night. Would I get her arrested if I tell them anything? Her mother is a lawyer so I'm sure she could get her off of any serious charges...

In the end, I decided that if it could help, I'd tell them anything.

"She seemed so miserable by the end of the party so she just kept drinking," I told her. "I tried to stop her and get her an Uber, but she walked away because she said she felt sick. I went to get Tracy to help me with her, but we lost track of her by then and I just assumed she went home with someone."

The officer wrote this down. I instantly felt guilty over painting her in such a bad light. And worse for not doing more for her.

"Did you hear anything from her friends or anyone else at the party?" Mr. O'Reilly asked.

I shook my head. "We kind of dropped the issue after we couldn't find her."

"You know you aren't in trouble for anything, right?" Mr. Hardy was a good teacher. I'm glad he was there. Mr. O'Reilly could be a real jerk sometimes.

"I know."

I didn't believe him for a second, though. If she was in danger or hurt or anything and I could stop it, I'd hold myself as responsible as anyone who really hurt her. I was praying to every god in every heaven that she would be safe. Whether or not any god would actually listen was another story.

Tracy

Kate had briefed me on the situation as soon as she was let go. Given that we had no direct connection with her that night, save Kate's brief conversation with her and her friends, we were not suspects in the issue. I knew nothing so I was going to be of no help. Kate was equally useless in the search, despite her speaking with Ashley that night. I believed I was being brought in solely because Kate dropped my name in her statement. I didn't have an issue with this as I clearly had nothing to hide.

"I never would have figured you for the party type, Ms. Summers," O'Reilly said with the most obvious snarky asshole sarcasm on the planet.

Even though I had to go to them because I was technically one of the "cool kids" because I was on Student Council with them, I really hated Spencer's parties. I don't like to drink, but would on occasion. I don't like Spencer's friends, but I showed up because we were on Student Council together. I was sacrificing my personal values just to be their "friends" on the surface.

"I went with Kate," I admitted. "If I'd have known how things would have gone down, I never would have gone at all and I would have told her to do the same."

"And I'm sure you're aware of the Ashley situation already?"

"Kate told me."

"Can you tell us anything about Lauren Bradshaw? She claims she can't remember anything. Did you see her at any point throughout the night?"

I shrugged. "I saw her drinking with Beth throughout the night, but we never interacted. I saw her go upstairs to check on Ashley at some point, but that was it. Ash was looking pretty sick. That's it."

"So Lauren was the last one to see Ashley before she disappeared?" O'Reilly asked. The officer sat forward in his chair, silent as the grave but with eyes that bored into me. I tried to avoid eye contact with him as much as possible.

Again, I shrugged. "I really don't know."

Lauren

“Could you just tell us what happened at that party?” O’Reilly asked, growing impatient.

“I um... I can’t remember...”

O’Reilly shook his head and rolled his eyes. He did not like me.

“You’re not in trouble, Lauren,” Mr. Hardy assured me in his seat beside O’Reilly. I had a feeling this wasn’t the first time he had said that exact phrase to someone today. “Just tell us anything you know so we can find her.”

“I swear, I don’t know where she is! I saw her later at the party and she was asleep.”

I wasn’t lying.

CELEBRATIONS

Spencer

The biggest perk of being the high school quarterback in a state where the gridiron is as holy as the Church you attend is that your neighbors don't give a shit what you do. So long as there aren't gunshots or a fire, they wouldn't dare get you in trouble. Shit, I wonder if they'd even do anything if there *was* a gunshot or a fire. Lots of people around here are alumni or go to the games and had no problem helping fund the massive stadium we play in. Point is my house was one of *the* biggest and best party destinations in town. Brad's parents' cabin south of Nacogdoches was arguably the second best because it's gated off and beside a lake. I have the advantage because my house is in town and we have a swimming pool.

Before the middle of Sophomore year, I never had to worry about hosting the parties. Charles or Brad or one of the other guys took care of that. But when Charles left and I was the undisputed leader of the team, I had to step up and learn how hosting parties actually worked. I didn't know shit about throwing them before and I still don't know anything about it today. I just stock up on snack food and supply half the alcohol and hope everyone else brings their own supply to keep us stocked for the night. The guys helped out the first couple times, but now it was basically up to me to deal with it myself.

The first in what I assumed would be a series of parties at Casa Barnett was the big "Post First Game of the Season Party." I do not come up with the names. I was responsible for this same party at the start of last season as well. That was the first time they made me host a party and I was scared shitless. Charles taught me a lot, though. Tonight was going to be a special one. We won our game, as every media outlet in the world predicted, by a score of 34-10 and now we got our first chance to relax since the year began. It probably wouldn't beat the "End of Summer Bash" I held a little over a week before, sadly.

Dad was at the game, but he didn't stay to the end. He was probably pissed I threw that pick late in the third quarter. In my defense, Tom dropped the ball and the guy was in the right place at the right time. I finished with three touchdowns. Not my best, but respectable.

He had a late flight to catch. To where, I really don't care. Besides, it mean I had the house to myself that weekend. After the game, I headed straight home so I could get ready for the party. The guys would be the first people there so we could get things set up and people would begin showing up as soon as I unlocked the door. I had the whole thing planned out to the last detail. I'm paranoid like that.

By ten, the front yard was full of people making their way inside. I didn't think a high school party could have a line, but there we were with dozens of people waiting for my permission to enter. I made a habit of making sure to come by every half-hour or so to admit people based on whether I knew them or thought they wouldn't break anything. It's amazing how much ass-kissing people will do to be seen standing in the same room as the "popular kids." It got so bad that there was another party going on in my front yard, keg and all. Me and some of the guys eventually had to go out and send them home.

How we didn't get a noise complaint within the first hour is beyond me. Like I said: perks of being the quarterback.

Highlights of the night were planned out in advance. Frank and I would only get a mild buzz going so we could keep things in order. Brad and some of the bigger dudes would get shitfaced and provide security. Tom was finally going to hook up with Casey, preferably at his own place but sadly I cannot control where people have sex if I can't stop them from doing it in my house. And Ashley and I were going to execute Operation Breakup.

Ashley and the girls arrived at exactly 10:35 and were let in by Brad. I knew we're supposed to just be friends now, but that dress she was wearing? Holy fuck. They all looked incredible, but she looked especially gorgeous. She'd kill me if she knew I was still into her, but can anyone on this planet ever blame me?

They walked right in to meet me and Frank in the kitchen. I could tell they had been pregaming just a little bit. They had to yell just for me to hear them. The music was blowing out my ear drums.

"Miss me?" Ashley playfully asked me. I could tell she had already been drinking.

"Just a little," I said with a wink.

"God, your house fucking rules," Casey said. She was the most drunk of the three of them. She had been over here five times now and she was somehow still amazed by my place.

"I'm still bugging him to clear out a guest room and let me move in sometime." Frank smiled. "It's not like he doesn't have seven extras or anything."

I tried to smile, but I couldn't bring myself to. I *did not* want my friends living here. They would want to get as far away as possible within the first day.

Thankfully for me, Ashley realized this was a sensitive topic for me and took my hand. "Let's go dance." She dragged me out to the living room with a drink at the ready.

So my house admittedly *is* really cool. Fifteen rooms, eight of which were bedrooms. The pool had a hot tub and a large stone fountain beside it. The hedges and lawn were tended by landscapers once per week. I never asked how much the property was worth, but I assume it was in the seven figure range. My dad might be a deadbeat, but he's a rich deadbeat.

I thought things would be fine. With hindsight, I should have realized how shitty everything was going to end up. Sucks that he probably doesn't have me or Megan in the will. He's an asshole like that.

Katherine

Okay so Spencer might be a total jock, but his house is amazing. It was a literal castle on the top of a hill near a lake in the richest part of town. He lives in a mansion and he has a pool with some kind of weird fountain with stone swans spitting into the water. I'd give anything to be this rich. I knew I'll never be able to afford law school.

Tracy drove me and we parked a few houses down. The street leading up to his house was practically filled from one end to the other with cars and trucks I recognized from the school parking lot. We managed to find a spot at the end of the street. I don't mind the walk. It cooled down quite a bit from the game. I realized too late that I'd probably got a killer sunburn. Of all the days to wear a tank top.

I couldn't help but notice all the other houses in the neighborhood. Each one was fancier than the last. I felt kind of bad that these people were about to have their night ruined by hundreds of teens screaming up and down the block. But then I remembered how much they paid to live on this street and I suddenly felt less upset. Rich people suck. Except Spencer.

I stood at the edge of his long driveway and really took the place in. I knew Tracy had been here before so I was the new kid on the block. The thought of being here was still strange to me. If I was now friends with Tracy, regardless of the election outcome, I might be able to come over here more often. Much as she might hate them, she could have very much been my ticket into getting close with the popular crowd.

And getting to spend more time with Spencer was... a very happy bonus.

"So this is how the top one percent lives," I said with a grin.

"It's even bigger on the inside," she said. "Trust me."

"I'm excited! This is my first party!"

"Yeah?" She took that in and nodded slowly to herself. Eventually, she spoke up again. "Just don't go too crazy with the drinking and you'll be fine."

I nodded my head and we began marching toward the house. I could understand how she thinks just by looking at her. She's dealing with an amateur. I'm not exactly the partying type. I've never even socially drank before. I snuck a bottle of wine from my Mom when I was fourteen and I heard about one of the other girls getting caught drunk at school, but that's it. It was stupid and I had a terrible hangover the next day. Tonight, though, I knew I was going to do a little drinking, but not a lot. Tracy said she was going to drink. She seems very stressed. I guess it comes with the territory of being popular.

We approached the door and I thought I was entering a nightclub or some kind of backroom gambling/fight club/dog fighting ring. Brad Kendrick was standing guard, alongside two of his football player friends. They had drinks in hand and stared down the people waiting in line like they had the plague. We stepped in front of them and let them stare at us. It felt weird seeing the popular guys actually look at me. I think Brad actually checked me out a little. He gave me a little wink as he opened the door for us. I looked away because I was worried I was going to turn as red as a tomato. He may not be as cute as Spencer, but he did have nice arms.

Very muscular. He also very clearly didn't skip leg day and that is extremely important. A house is only as strong as its base and Brad was built like Spencer's mansion.

The house itself, to put it bluntly, was packed. Any fire marshal in the world would shut this place down faster than the speed of light. We had to all but crawl between the groups of people to get into the living room. The music was blowing my ears out, but I didn't mind. Even though I felt like I was trapped in a straight jacket with all these people around me, all these eyes on me as I passed... but I kinda liked it. It was relieving. Liberating.

That was when I saw Spencer and Frank handing out booze from the kitchen. They were all smiles and laughs. Seeing them in their natural habitat was intriguing. They were a little more serious at school, but here they could be themselves. Spencer looked so cute that night. I almost died when he handed me a beer and said hello. He gave Tracy this smile that was a little strange. Kind of like he didn't expect her to be here. Frank gave her a similar one. I brushed it off because it was none of my business.

Ashley stepped up to her and whispered something in her ear. The music made it so I couldn't hear if I tried. Tracy's face contorted into a look of pure disgust. I considered asking her what was wrong, but thought better of it. This was none of my business. I gave Frank a meek smile when he looked at me. I doubt he even knew my name.

Tracy took her beer and walked away without so much as returning the smile. I hurried after her into the living room.

"They have a tray with cocaine over by the chocolate fountain, if that's your thing."

Beth

“Promise me you won’t go too crazy? You already had enough at that dumb game.”

“Oh, please, that was nothing,” Lauren giggled. “And it wasn’t a dumb game! We won!”

“Yay.” I spoke with as much dry indifference as possible. I could not care about the result of the game. The opposing team stunk like raw sewage. Spencer put on a perfectly acceptable performance and we walked away with the win. Now we were allowed to celebrate with alcohol, sex, and other wanton acts of degeneracy. I love this school.

Frank Newman approached us with that stupid grin on his face. He didn’t even seem to notice me. Instead, he was looking at Lauren to my left. “Lauren! So glad you made it!”

“I’m still not going out with you.”

He grabbed at his chest, feigning a heart attack. “Oh... oh no! My chest! My heart! It’s broken! Oh please someone help!”

“You thirsty?” Lauren asked me.

I do not drink. I was not breaking my sobriety for one night of debauchery with my girlfriend. Not until we are married, anyway. I’ll break my self-imposed vow of sobriety for that. “I’m driving tonight. You have fun, though.”

“Suit yourself.”

She shot Frank one last unimpressed glance before walking off into the living room. I followed without giving Frank a second thought. We made ourselves comfortable on the couch. I was surprised that there was actually a spot. Every seat in the house was taken. I can only assume the original occupants of this couch left to pass out in the toilet water. This leather was very soft. I hoped no one puked on it while we were there.

Lauren wasted no time shotgunning her beer. I pitied her evolutionary desire to numb herself to the world around her. No one should be forced to zap their brain cells to feel good about themselves. Lauren is perfect the way she is. Why would she kill herself like this?

I followed her eyes and saw what the probably possible reason was. At the base of the stairs stood Ashley Williams in all of her peaking in high school glory. She sipped her beer and spoke with her friends. Her dress was so short, I could see her underwear when she bent down to set her bottle on the floor. Lauren had to have seen it, too. But that wasn’t what had her flustered.

“WHO’S HAVING FUN TONIGHT?!” Spencer yelled at the top of his lungs. Everyone in the house cheered and roared with applause. The music got cranked up to a new level. I felt like my head was going to explode.

And then Ashley and Spencer began to make out in front of everyone. I could feel Lauren tense up beside me. I wanted to scream.

As if by instinct, I reached over and took her hand in mine. I didn’t need to reach far, we were basically sitting on top of one another. I took it and I held it tight and I was not going to let go. There was no fucking chance I was letting this go. I wouldn’t be her. I wouldn’t throw this away. If I lost this, I would fucking kill myself. What kind of a moron throws away *this* and everything that comes with it?

Katherine

I honestly thought she was kidding about the chocolate fountain. I figured I'd survive despite this. Grabbing a little fork, I stabbed a strawberry and let the smooth milk chocolate wash over it. Even though we stopped for dinner after the game, I was still really hungry. I offered one to Tracy, but she shook her head and sipped her beer.

No cocaine to be found, though. I awkwardly glanced across the room and saw Ashley with her friends.

Glancing back at the rest of the living room, I saw Beth and Lauren sitting on the couch together. I wondered if they really were a couple and if Beth was really as bad as Tracy made her out to be. She was always cool with me before. But why would Tracy lie to me? It's not like I'd judge them for being in a secret relationship and Beth feeling threatened by someone knowing.

My concentration was broken when a large guy stepped in front of me, brushing his hand over my arm. Imagine my shock when Brad apologized for touching me and took one of the little forks by the fountain. He stabbed a marshmallow and smiled at me as it was coated in chocolate. Look, I know he's a total jock and probably just wants to get in my pants, but the attention was still nice.

Our little moment was broken when Tracy took my hand and forcibly pulled me into the crowd. "Come with me, I wanna show you something."

I gave Brad a little wave as I was taken away by my handler. He winked back. I could get used to this whole "popularity" thing.

"What was that about?" I asked, more than annoyed by her ruining this for me.

"Don't talk to him," she demanded. We reached the hallway and stopped outside a closet.

"What? Why? He's kinda cool."

"No, he isn't," she said, her tone dripping with disgust that I'd even consider saying this. "He's a total scumbag. Like all his dumb jock friends. But he's the worst."

It's not like I don't know he's a horny teenage boy. What could be so bad about him? Deciding that anyone could be listening in to our conversation, I took Tracy's hand and pulled her into the bathroom. If this is Spencer's powder room, his actual bathroom must be as big as my bedroom. I really admired the little fancy soaps shaped like seashells and ducks.

"So what's wrong with him?" I asked. "Tell me."

"Just... trust me. He's an asshole who just wants to get into your pants."

"Well, obviously, but I wouldn't let him," I replied. I never said anything about not kissing him, though. If he wanted to.

"I know you wouldn't *want* to..." She hesitated and chose her words extremely carefully. "He... he gets very weird around girls. He's creepy and says some weird stuff when he thinks it's just him and the guys, and sometimes not even then, and—"

"Alright, alright, I understand. I'm sorry I upset you so much."

She frowned at me. "Why would I be mad at you over this? I'm looking out for you. *You* don't know these people. *I* do. It's nauseating. The shit I've heard them say just trying to sound

tough or manly or cool. Fuck them all, they're scum." She sighed and cooled off a little after taking a deep breath. "I just don't want you to get with him and do something you'd regret."

I gave her a gentle hug. It was the only thing I could think to do. "Thank you."

"Now let's get outta here and go have fun," Tracy said, her confidence back. I happily accepted and we exited the bathroom together. We got a weird look from some guy who was absolutely wasted, but didn't linger long enough for him to speak to us.

I couldn't help but wonder what Brad could have possibly said or done to make Tracy hate him so much. I think the whole idea of "boys will be boys" is utterly disgusting so whatever he could have said to make her this uncomfortable must be terrible. Does Spencer know they guys say these things? Does he say it, too? He seemed like a pretty decent guy who wouldn't talk like that with his buddies for social points. I didn't like having him on such a high pedestal because I wouldn't want someone doing that to me. But I've been crazy about this guy since Freshman year, dumb as it might be. Would he allow someone like Brad to exist on his team? Would he just let him say dirty shit and laugh along with him?

Or was Tracy jealous he was showing me attention instead of her...

Ashley

Seeing them together made me want to vomit and I knew it wasn't because I was drinking. But seeing them actively campaigning in Spencer's house made me want to scream.

I got dragged aside by Casey, who overheard them while she was flirting with Tom. When she heard what they were discussing, she came straight to me. Apparently, Beth had taken some of the... shall we say... "lesser characters" at the party aside and was pitching them the merits of a Lauren Bradshaw presidency at Arlington. She specifically targeted people who were only here because they were friends of friends or had no real loyalty to Spencer or myself.

Needless to say, I had Frank eject these people as soon as they were away from Beth so she could not use this ammunition against me. There's a dozen other parties they could go to instead. Get over it.

I approached Spencer, who was drinking with some of the other cheerleaders and soccer players. You'd think that his "girlfriend" would be jealous that he was spending his time with some admittedly gorgeous girls, but they knew not to make a move on him. He was mine. At least as far as they knew.

"Can you believe it?" I asked, incredulously. "She's campaigning at your own party!"

"What?" He could be so oblivious sometimes. It's almost endearing. And infuriating.

"Beth. She's talking with some nobodies and trying to get them to vote for Lauren!"

I could feel the eyes of a dozen girls on me, judging everything I was saying. I instantly felt small, felt pathetic. God, what is wrong with me? Did I hate this girl so much that I'd complain about *this* just to get someone to hate her as much as I do?

"So?"

And this was where the judgment by the other girls faded in my mind. How could he not take this seriously?! After the stunt she pulled in Bio, you'd think my knight in shining armor would step up and do whatever he could to help me deal with this bitch. I don't know if it's because we broke up or if he just doesn't see the gravity of the situation, but he really didn't seem to understand or even care.

"Ash, please don't start anything. We're all having fun."

"Why is she even here anyway?" I questioned. "We don't even like them."

I noticed one of the girls gave a smirk to one of her friends. I forced myself not to curl my hand into a fist and knock her teeth out. Did she know? Did she hear about the bathroom fight? Lauren wouldn't have said something to a total random. Right?

"Because it's a *party*, I'm not banning people from my own house—"

"Then explain the line outside," I fired back, trying to regain control of the situation. "You don't have a problem with keeping certain people out when it suits you."

He had no comeback for this. He just mouthed "*Please. Don't.*" to me and prayed I'd listen. Unfortunately for him, I was not having it.

"If you're not banning people, then I am." I left him in the dust and went into the living room. I made sure to take note of the people Beth was courting. If I recognized their faces, I'd be sure to bury them. Sadly, I didn't know them. I saw Victoria and Jasmine listening in for a

second before walking away. I think they were laughing about it so I wasn't going to go after them. Victoria was too nice for me to hate anyway. Poor girl.

Someone who had no problems going after nice people was Frank. I immediately sought him out in the backyard. He was chilling with some of the guys, doing shots and talking shit on people they didn't like. I had no problem getting some drunken idiots to do my dirty work for a couple of minutes. "I need your help." Frank and Brad smiled at me, wondering what I could possibly want from them.

It was the sweetest sight seeing them approaching Beth as she stood in front of a small crowd. I had the best seat in the house from the sliding glass door. Perfect view of the fireworks to come. I could care less what she was saying to them. I'd just ask someone later. I could tell she had no idea this was coming because she panicked when they grabbed her by the arms and started pulling her toward the front door, kicking and screaming.

"Hey! Let go of me! You pigs!"

Seeing her get this angry was glorious.

Lauren ran up from her own little crowd of people on the other side of the room and started beating Brad on the back with her forearms. It was kind of cute seeing this dainty little princess trying to take on the troll that lives under the bridge.

"Brad, wait! Let her go!" She kept hitting him, though I doubt he felt anything. "Frank, stop! What's the matter with you?!"

Frank stopped pulling Beth for a moment to humor her. "We heard about her little stunt with O'Reilly."

"Only seems fair," Brad added with a smarmy grin on his face. He gave Lauren a once-over before reaching for her as well. I stopped being as happy as before when his eyes lingered on her. He grabbed at her arm, but missed and started to paw at her chest. I bet he'd try to justify it by saying he was trying to get a grip on her shirt.

"HEY!"

Spencer's rage towered over the music. A quarterback needs to have a loud voice that can be heard from one sideline to the other in the event the crowd is too loud. Spencer rarely ever raised his voice. He was absolutely fuming when he saw Frank and Brad. Someone cut the music off and let Spencer have his moment. He walked right up to Frank, his best friend in the whole world, and gave him a death stare.

"Let her go or get out of my house." Frank's eyes went wide and he dropped Beth immediately. Brad, meanwhile, still had a hand gripping Lauren's top. Spencer sized him up and waited before speaking. "Don't make me say it again, man."

Brad finally gave up and let Lauren go. She rushed over to Beth and pulled her away from the guys.

With the music turned off, everyone could hear Spencer scolding his guys. He was like a father talking down to his deadbeat children. "We're here to have fun. Nobody hurts anyone. Nobody gets revenge on anyone, nobody does anything here unless I say so. Clear?" Spencer

turned to the guy who was manning the speaker. “Get the music back on. Let’s enjoy ourselves. Sound good?”

The music turned back on, but the tension could be cut with a chainsaw. I watched people start laughing nervously about it with their friends as soon as their voices were drowned out by the sound.

Spencer walked after Beth and Lauren. I couldn’t tell what they were saying, but I saw Beth shoot me a dirty look. She knew who ordered it. Especially after Frank let everyone know that something had gone on between us. Who else would have ordered them to do that? Spencer seemed like he was trying to calm them down. He should have just told them to get the fuck out and never come back. They won’t ever come here again after this, that much is clear. I think I got my point across even though the execution was sloppy.

When he was done talking to the girls, Spencer marched straight to me, brow furrowed. I turned and walked outside. No sense in doing this in front of everyone. When we made it to the other side of the backyard, far away from any spectators, he shot me the same tone he gave the guys and read me the riot act. “Feel good about yourself?”

“Very,” I admitted with some venom on my tongue.

“You’re a real bitch sometimes. You know that, right?”

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “You should have just let them go.”

“Because it’s my house and I don’t want to look like the asshole who has random girls kicked out because of some petty bullshit—”

“Oh, fuck you and your high and mighty routine. You think you’re such hot shit because you can throw a football and your friends dress you up in a cape and crown on you for some laughs. It’s all a big fucking joke and you’re the punchline. You know why I want that bitch gone—”

“Because you’re a petty, jealous asshole who can’t get over herself! You think the world is all about *you* and *you’re* the victim and you don’t give a shit about what anyone else thinks and it’s nauseating sometimes.”

“You’re such a dickhead. Fuck you. Have fun at your stupid fucking party. I’ll be with my friends. If you come near me, I’ll break your goddamn nose.”

I muttered a number of curses and insults under my breath and I went for the house. I could give a shit if everyone in the backyard was listening in on us. Let them tell their friends we’re fighting. Fuck him, he deserved to be alone.

Casey and Heather were waiting for me when I got back inside. I brushed past them and headed straight for the kitchen. My blood was boiling. I was white fucking hot. I needed something to cool down. On the counter was an unopened bottle of tequila. I could give a shit how much it was going to sting. I ripped the bottle open and took the biggest swig of my life. The burning in my throat only made me angrier. If anyone tried to even look at me right now, this bottle was getting smashed over their head.

I couldn’t help but laugh a truly sour laugh when I thought about the whole situation in my head. We did, in fact, give everyone the public breakup we had been planning.

Katherine

So I'm not saying it was the worst public breakup that has ever happened, but this definitely ranks up there somewhere. I've heard the theories about Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love that easily top this, though this may rank as a close second. Everyone was talking about it within minutes of it occurring. Who would have thought a bunch of drunken teenagers would spend so much of their stupor discussing the love lives of two people that have probably never even spoken ten words to them?

Tracy and I had a front row seat for the fight. We went outside after the whole thing with Brad and sat down on Spencer's pool chairs. From across the backyard, we watched them hurl cuss word after cuss word, insult after insult. I almost wanted to get between them and try to separate them. I'd never seen them so angry before. I actually averted my eyes when Ashley marched back to the house, the thought of her seeing me watching was too much to bear. I wanted absolutely no part of this.

Are all parties like this? It seems exhausting.

It was around two in the morning now and the party was still going strong. We stayed in the backyard for about an hour after the fight happened before going back inside. Tracy wanted to get another drink and I wanted some water. We got split up for a moment when she said she had to go to the bathroom. After getting a sudden rush of claustrophobia, I decided to make my way back outside for a little break. This time, I decided to check out the anti-party going on on the front lawn.

To my disappointment, the counter-protesters and wannabes standing in line had all but gone home. Only a few people remained on the edges of the lawn. Spencer's driveway, which is wide enough for two and a half cars to be parked side-by-side and was as long as a street, was nearly empty. I was kind of surprised so many people had left already. It wasn't even that late out. Only around midnight. I figured the fight must have turned a lot of people off for the night.

Look at me calling someone else a wannabe. Pot calling the kettle black.

I was surprised to find Ashley sitting on the front step, her head in her hands. She was... a mess. She looked terrible and had clearly been crying. I wondered if that was why so many people out front had gone home. They couldn't stand the sight of a teenage girl weeping.

Ashley slowly reached into her pockets and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Personally, I find smoking to be absolutely disgusting. I felt bad that she had such a gross habit. She didn't hesitate to try lighting one. The lighter didn't work. She kept striking it and striking it, but nothing happened.

"Son of a..." She threw the lighter across the lawn as hard as she could. She made it as far as the oak tree. Pretty good toss. Ashley shook her head and buried it again.

"Those things'll kill you, you know," I said with a slight smirk. Not a condescending one, by any means. Just something to lighten the mood a bit.

She didn't look back up at me. "The sooner, the better."

"Mind if I..."

She raised her hand and gave it a small wave, signaling it was okay for me to sit down. I accepted the offer and sat beside her, making sure we had a few inches between us so it wasn't totally awkward. I had never been close to Ashley, but something about her made me want to help. At least say *something* to make her feel better. I rubbed my hands together. Even though we were in Texas, it gets chilly at night. "Kinda cold out."

Ashley shrugged. She didn't care. She looked like she'd rather freeze to death right now.

"I know this is none of my business..." I waited a second to see if she would cut me off. This really was none of my business. She didn't so I continued. "Mind if I ask what happened back there? I mean, I'm no relationship expert, but threatening to break your boyfriend's nose at a party—"

She finally cut off my nervous rambling with a simple "He's not my boyfriend."

I assumed they were broken up now, but I mean couples fight. Nobody's perfect. Maybe things just got kinda heated and they had to blow off some steam. They didn't officially break up as far as I knew, though. Relationships are so confusing.

"Was this it?" I asked. "Did you guys break up?"

She leaned against the railing and rubbed her temples. Her voice was worn down, raspy, defeated. "We broke up weeks ago. We're only staying together for the election. We were gonna officially break up soon." She gently laughed into her hand, a laugh filled with sarcasm and annoyance at the world. "Guess we might have sped that part up a couple of weeks, huh?"

I couldn't help myself. "Why'd you break up? I thought you two were cute together."

"Yeah, you and everyone else," she bitterly replied. After a moment of thinking, she went on. "We're two different people. Plus I was an absolute asshole to him ever since we got together. He wasn't perfect either, trust me. He was such a pompous dickwad sometimes. Our friends are douchebags who took bets on when we would fuck... and I'm still not over my ex. Simple as that."

That was... a lot to take in. I didn't know how to respond. What was there to say? I finally settled on asking, "Who was he?"

"Doesn't matter."

Something about how quickly she deflected made me think. Think long and hard. I didn't want to accuse her of anything. I didn't want to pry. I had my suspicions based on what Tracy told me. I considered if this was what I really wanted to say. Based on everything going on and what I had heard, I decided I wanted to help. And if it meant asking Ashley to expose her deepest secret, I'd take the risk.

"It's not a he, is it?"

Ashley's eyes opened. She slowly sat up, never so much as looking over at me. She clenched her fists and took slow, methodical breaths. Whatever she was thinking was being planned out to the last syllable, the last consonant. "How'd you know?"

I was expecting more resistance. At least an "I don't know what you're talking about." or something to that effect. Despite not being out, she didn't try anything to keep her secret. We weren't even friends. Why would she tell me this? Maybe my being a near-total stranger nobody

would ever listen to made her want to open up. She'll most likely never tell me why she opened up to me of all people.

"Tell you the truth, I didn't," I said, lowering my voice a little to make sure the other people outside couldn't hear. "But I saw you looking at Lauren and how she used to look at you and I thought something was up. It's not your fault or anything." I smiled a little at her, hoping it would show I wasn't messing with her. "She is really, really pretty. I couldn't blame you for staring at her."

Admittedly, I started rambling again at the end. Whatever I could think of to say to help her feel more comfortable just came out. The one thing I made sure not to say was that Tracy knew everything and that she had told me. I didn't want her to get in trouble. It's bad enough that Beth knew Tracy had overheard Ashley and Lauren's conversation. It'd be worse if Ashley knew someone besides Lauren knew their secret.

"Yeah, well, that's the past."

"She seems like a really nice girl."

"Yeah," she responded. "She is." She sounded very wistful over the whole thing. She still had feelings for Lauren. It was painfully obvious.

We sat in silence. I didn't want to press the issue unless she was comfortable with it. I was shocked she even opened up this much to begin with. She wasn't a bad person. Just going through a lot. I wondered if she had been using. I don't want to judge someone for being an addict and I didn't even know if she was one. The rumors had been swirling since Sophomore year when she began hanging out with Kara and the other Seniors. I tried to avoid gossip as best I could, but even I'd heard of Ashley's alleged problem.

"I won't tell anyone. If that's what you're worried about."

"Who cares anymore?"

"I'm sure some people would," I replied. "Her, for example."

"I wouldn't out her," she said firmly. "I'm not going to ruin her life." She tensed up, another wave of rage coursing through her blood. "Can't say the same for that bitch, though."

It wasn't that hard to guess who "that bitch" was. I knew I would need to talk to her at some point and see what she was thinking about this whole mess. Especially over her interaction with Tracy. That was a can of worms that needed to be opened, whether I was ready for it or not.

"Beth."

"Yup." Ashley took her half-empty pack of cigarettes and tossed it aside.

"And they're together."

Ashley nodded. "And that's why I am what I am."

I pointed at the pack of cigarettes now resting at her feet in the finely trimmed grass. "That was probably a smart move."

Ashley smiled.

Spencer

You'd think I'd be used to having loads of people staring at me and judging my every movement after two full years of being a starting quarterback. But after what happened with Ash, every single eye was on me and it made my skin crawl. I tried to get away from the crowd as best I could after she stormed off. It was useless. After chugging down a beer or three, I resigned myself to my fate of being the topic of this week's lunchtime gossip and faced the judgment of my peers in my living room like a man.

Frank was the first one to approach me. I didn't regret telling him and Brad off. They had no right to put their hands on Lauren and Beth. If he wanted to throw a hissy fit over it, I'd be more than happy to knock his lights out. We might be brothers, but even I have my limits.

"You alright, man?" he asked, sitting beside me with a full bottle in hand.

"I really don't know." My voice was hoarse, weak. After yelling the whole game so the other guys could hear me and getting into a screaming match with Ash, my throat was shot. To be honest, I just didn't have the energy to have a conversation.

Frank sat and drank with me in silence. Whatever song was playing was garbage. Some real club trash. When he eventually spoke, I had to strain to hear him. "Why'd you stop us back there?"

Well shit, I don't know. You grabbed a girl and tossed her around like a rag doll and I saw Brad try to feel up Lauren. I know I did. Why would you try to act cool by roughing up girls half your size? Fucking idiot.

"Because it was a dumb thing to do."

Frank shook his head, unamused with my honesty. "You're the one who said we should get back at her for what she did to Ashley. Don't try to play innocent here."

"And that was wrong of me and I was an asshole for supporting it."

I am an asshole. I know it. Today just proved it to everyone around me.

Frank wanted to say something, but he bit his tongue so hard, it made my mouth hurt. I wasn't in the mood to press this issue any further so it was for the best that he didn't respond. "Is Ashley okay?" he finally asked, his voice trembling.

"Who cares?"

Frank loosened up and tried to calm me down. "Don't say that, man, come on, I know you love her. And she loves you. You can't let some dumb fight ruin that."

If only you knew.

"Just do me a favor and leave Lauren alone," I ordered. "And Beth. It's not worth it." He started to speak again to protest, but I was not having it. "And don't talk about that stupid election or me and Ash as Homecoming King and Queen or just anything anymore. I'm already sick of it. And football. I'm sick of all of this stupid meaningless bullshit."

I was tired. I was so, so tired. The worst part of the football season was around the middle, specifically weeks five through eight. We would be in the heat of the season and playoffs were coming. This also meant school would get more difficult and we got more homework and

tests to look forward to. If I wasn't the starting quarterback, I would have quit last year around this time because of how much stress I had to endure. I was so burned out, I wanted to fucking die. But the team needed me and I need to go to college if I'm ever going to do whatever. I already felt this level of burnout and it'd only been one week of school. I really didn't know if I could survive this whole season at this rate.

I mean, shit, can anyone blame me? There is far too much pressure on athletes in high school anymore, especially in regards to our futures. Interviews for the paper and the news and sports websites, college recruits showing up at our houses to dissect our brains, actually visiting the colleges and being offered free food and parties and sex with college girls. But also stuff back home like grades and relationships and family life and somehow being awake for classes after doing eight hours of classes, two hours of practicing, homework, film study, family dinner, and cramming for a test the next day.

We're getting worked to death anymore and we see no benefits from it. High school and college kids don't get paid for playing sports, something I find to be criminal *especially* at the college level. The best we can hope for is after hundreds of hours of hard work yields us the chance to get a scholarship to play for a college team, but even that is a stretch 'cause there are thousands and thousands of people just like us and there is always going to be someone who is better. There are dozens of people just like me who were the big star of their team and then have to get into the real world and accept that some people are just better than us. I got to see that first hand last year when we got smoked in the playoffs and the other quarterback went on to become a true freshman starter for Oregon State.

Am I that good? Am I that special? This is the shit that keeps me up at night.

I was brought back to attention when I saw Brad, Tom, Casey, and Heather playing football in the house. They were throwing over the heads of all the people dancing and drinking. Red flags immediately shot up in my mind. I can handle cleaning up a ton of trash and these people know damn well I'd kill them if they broke anything around here, but one errant throw from Casey or Heather and I'm absolutely fucked.

"Hey! Take it outside!"

This drew the attention of everyone in the room once again. Tom had just thrown the ball at Brad and he nearly dropped the pass. He was too busy looking at me. And for a moment, just a brief moment, I swear I saw Brad get angry at me. As if the thought of me telling him off twice in one night was more than his ego could bear.

Despite this, he led the group toward the front door and I lost sight of them as they ran out onto the porch. Nobody else followed after them.

"And watch the flower beds!"

Ashley

Katherine and I spent the next hour or so talking. It was strange being able to actually *talk* with a girl who wasn't Lauren or maybe Michelle. Sure, I have Casey and Heather to talk to, but we don't *talk*. We talk about boys and sex and school gossip and clothes and other meaningless shit, but I can't remember the last time any of us had a deep conversation about our fears or dreams or thoughts on politics or the future.

Michelle was the only person I've ever been close enough with to open up to with things like that, but she stuck with Lauren after the breakup. She didn't even know why she was forced to choose between her two close friends. I guess she just assumed her besties were going through a rough patch and hoped we'd grow up and fix things. I sometimes wondered what Lauren said about me to her.

This conversation was different, though. Katherine was really down to earth. Really sweet. She was nothing like my "friends." She actually cared about having a real discussion with someone she barely knows. Casey and Heather are great in their own way and I hate making them out like the worst human beings alive that are unable to talk to people. I love them like they were my own sisters. But I desperately needed someone like Katherine in my life. I knew she was just doing it to make me feel better after my fight with Spencer, but it's the thought that counts.

What hurt the most was I couldn't help myself from sounding like a sad sack. I couldn't stop saying things that screamed "Oh boo hoo, pity me please." even though I was desperate for someone to connect with. Someone who actually cared. I'd never admit it, but I had never felt so alone in my entire life. Mental illness can be as crippling as a car crash. I wish I had an actual excuse for being such a crybaby all of the time.

"Relationships are overrated anyway," I told her, wondering if she had ever actually been with someone before. She said she hadn't, but she could have been lying. "You're only setting yourself up to get your heart broken."

"Don't say that," she replied, trying in vain to make me feel better. "You—"

Oh, oh! Ms. Duvall! Can I answer this! I know the answer!

"Aww, sweetie, don't worry! You'll find somebody! You're a sweet girl! Just be yourself!" I laughed. I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye. "God, I hate that line."

I really couldn't help but laugh, despite her trying to make me feel better. I'd heard this one before. My Mom, my grandmother, my friends. They all told me that I just had to "be myself" and people would fall in love with me. That all I had to do was go about my day and the person I am destined to be with would ride in on white horse and sweep me off my feet and make love to me beside a lake and we'd get married and have kids and live happily ever after.

The honest to God truth is no one will ever love me for who I am. I've proven that twice now. Who I am is unlovable. Broken.

Lauren was the only one I could ever bring myself to love. She was the one. She *is* the one. I knew I'd never settle for someone or pretend to be into guys just for the sake of my reputation again. She was the only person I will ever fantasize about myself marrying and

spending my life with. I didn't even believe in marriage before she and I got together. Growing up with parents who fought constantly will do that to you. I threw that away because I'm a fucking mess and I'll probably never be able to speak to her again. Not after that night. And after what happened in the bathroom? Forget it.

Spencer was thrust on me like a cold. I had to date him. People expected it. People made money from it from that stupid fucking bet. For months, he thought he took my virginity and probably would do anything to stay with me. And now he's the laughing stock of his own party for fighting with his girlfriend. I feel sorry for him in some ways.

And now I lost them both.

"I know it seems hard, but look at you! You're hot!" Katherine was trying so hard. I wanted to hug her. She had a certain innocence about her I envied. She didn't have to deal with the shit I did. "You're really smart, driven, really really pretty, popular—"

"You're really sweet," I admitted. And she was. "But it doesn't matter. None of it does."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because once people get to know me, like once they *really* get to know me, they absolutely hate me."

"I don't hate you." She smiled happily at me.

"You don't know me."

"Not yet."

For a moment, for the briefest of moments, I let my guard down. I let myself crush on this girl for just a moment. She was being so kind and considerate. She seemed like she wanted to get to know me and liked what she already knew.

Plus she is really cute in a kind of nerdy way...

After I let myself fall for this near-total stranger for one brief moment, I swore it would never happen again. I'd never let myself feel anything for her. I reminded myself that I'm lonely and she was there and that was it. This wasn't real love. I just craved acceptance. I needed someone to understand. That is what snapped me back to reality. It wasn't physical attraction. It was the need to be emotionally accepted and wanted and desired.

And I never found myself attracted to Katherine Duvall again.

My sudden loss of feelings was aided by the front door swinging open and four bodies hurling themselves out toward the lawn. The shock of having our private moment interrupted was quite the mood killer. It only took the slightest of glances to see that my dear friends, Casey and Heather, were going to play catch with Brad and Tom. I could tell this was just foreplay for Tom and Casey before they inevitably hooked up back in Tom's car in about... say... a half hour? The way she was looking at him gave it away quite well.

"They don't know me either," I told Katherine as we watched them drunkenly flail around, trying in vain to play catch while suffering from double-vision.

"I thought they were your best friends?"

"They are," I admitted. "But they don't know *anything* about me. Everything about me I hate. What kind of best friend doesn't know everything about their best friend?"

"I wouldn't tell my best friend half of my deepest darkest secrets," she admitted with a slight chuckle. I couldn't tell if it was directed at her comment or the fact that Heather just slipped and was struggling to stand back up.

"I seriously doubt you have many deep, dark secrets," I countered.

"I have a few."

I almost pressed the issue. My innate desire to be a total neb-nose that learns everyone's gossip nearly won out. It was a trait I picked up from Kara. She and Kylie knew everything about everyone and didn't fear exploiting it for their own gain. It took everything in me to choke down my desire to learn these deep secrets. I do know for a fact that she didn't have anything nearly as dark as the skeletons in my closet, though.

Holy shit, she isn't even paying attention anymore. She's staring at Brad. She's not even trying to hide it. Okay, I need to nip this in the bud.

"Don't tell me you're into *Brad*." I groaned. I didn't fear them hearing me. They were screaming like banshees halfway across the lawn.

Katherine looked upset that I'd ask it in that specific judgy way. "I mean... maybe? He's kinda cute, but Tracy said I should stay away from him—"

"Listen to Tracy on this one. That guy's a massive creep," I warned.

"But *why* is he a creep?" she asked. "What does he really do that makes him so weird to you guys? What has he done?"

"If you're a girl and you're not doing him, he doesn't want anything to do with you." That clearly didn't have the intended effect I wanted. I hoped the thought of being a pump-and-dump would be a turn off, but she still seemed conflicted. It would be for me, at least. Was this girl so desperate to get laid that she'd ignore two people who know him fairly well saying to stay the fuck away from him? I seriously doubted it. "Just avoid him," I went on. "If he talks to you, just tell him you're not interested and back off. If he keeps trying, find me. I'll get Spencer to kick his ass. He isn't exactly looking for love, if you get what I mean. You do *not* want to become his fuck buddy."

"I thought you hated him," she said.

"Brad?"

"Spencer."

I sighed. "No, I'm just... really angry right now. I could never hate him. He's been too good to me, especially over the past couple days. We're never going to be a couple again, but we can still be friends." I almost jumped when Katherine gave my hand a squeeze. I took a deep breath and calmed down. Clearly I had been drinking too much. But I didn't intend to stop. Tonight had been too much. It felt nice to have someone hold my hand.

"Well, if you ever need someone to confide in, I won't judge you," she said with another smile. "Come to me whenever you want to talk."

If only you knew about me.

I smiled back. "Thank you, Katherine."

"Call me Kate."

“Thank you, Kate.”

I couldn't help myself. I rested my head on her left shoulder and let myself relax for the first time in what seemed like hours. I didn't care if anyone saw me and suspected something. I needed someone who would listen to me and I found her, even if she didn't know who she was talking to. Not really.

It was just nice to feel like someone understood for a little while.

After we got bored of watching the worst game of football I'd ever seen, we stood up and went back inside. The party was dying down considerably from earlier in the night. I thought it would last another couple hours or so going full blast, but I guess I was wrong.

We made our way into the living room and saw them dancing in the middle of the room. Lauren was drunkenly stumbling around while Beth held her upright. Lauren looked like a mess. That was when Beth glanced over Lauren's shoulder and made eye contact with me and Kate on the far side of the room. Specifically me. I watched Beth's left hand slowly descend down the small of Lauren's back and rest on top of Lauren's ass. Beth grinned at me. I don't know what she enjoyed more: the view or the feeling. It didn't matter. Nothing fucking matters.

Before I knew it, I rushed into the kitchen and found an unopened bottle of wine resting on the table. I tore the room apart looking for the nearest corkscrew.

“I'm sorry,” Kate meekly said as I struggled with the corkscrew.

“Why? You're not the sociopathic bitch who enjoys making me feel bad,” I grumbled.

“You can't let her get to you like that,” Kate said, trying to encourage me to be the better person and ignore her petty attempts at hurting my feelings.

“Yeah, well.” The cork finally came off. I tossed it and the corkscrew aside. “Who cares anymore, right?” I searched the cabinets for wine glasses. No luck. I instead settled with two tall light blue plastic cups. Going for fancy and high class tonight. I poured them nearly to the brim. I would have just drank straight from the bottle, but I had company that I wanted to impress. I pressed one forward across the table and toward Kate. “Here. Enjoy.”

Kate stared at it with a look of nervous confusion. “Oh, thanks, but I don't really...”

“You'll like it,” I told her. “It's sweet.”

Kate succumbed to the peer pressure and took a sip. After just one, she coughed a few times as she experienced the burning sensation of alcohol for the first time. I felt bad for laughing as soon as it escaped my lips. “Be thankful it's not vodka.”

I took a long, long sip. I wished it actually was vodka.

Beth

To say I was having a good time at this party would be a factually incorrect statement.

To say I was not having a good time at this party would also be equally incorrect.

I simply existed in that very moment in time. I was but a casual outside observer in the universe, watching time march on knowing there is nothing I can do about it. As the people around me I shared oxygen with drank themselves sick and engaged in partially clothed acts of debauchery on the recliner, dance floor, pool chairs, and presumably in any room with a working lock, I enjoyed the moment with my amazing girlfriend.

Like our classmates, she was drinking heavily. I did not personally approve of how much she chose to drink and tried my damndest to force her to have some water in between her numerous drinks. Sadly, she was not as interested in being healthy after she had started stumbling around and enjoying herself without my support.

It was well past two in the morning. I was getting rather tired, but I would not leave Lauren behind. We sat down on the couch to relax for a while as she continued to drink. For the tenth time that night, I politely declined her offer of a bottle of beer. I did not mind her forgetting she had offered me multiple drinks throughout the night. She was drunk. She needed sleep.

“You need to lighten up a little and have some fun,” she said, taunting me.

“Oh, I’m lighter than air right now,” I mused.

“Come on, let’s dance.” She stood up and took me by my hands, raising me to my feet. As much as I loved her and wanted nothing more than to let loose a bit and spend time with her, I had to constantly remind myself what was at stake. Where we were. Who these people were. What they did.

“I think we need to keep it on the down low a bit.”

Lauren gave this little drunken laughing scoff that resulted in her blowing a raspberry in my face. I instantly smelled like her most recent beer. “Oh, forget these idiots. They’re not watching. Who cares what they think?”

“You will in the morning,” I warned her.

Lauren stuck her tongue out and started dancing around me. Granted, she was stumbling the entire time. I was genuinely worried she was going to fall over. Despite my fears, she was swaying around me and ended up grinding on me once or twice. She was in no position to give consent to literally anything, though. I let myself smile at her antics for a second.

Then I saw her.

Ashley and Katherine entered the living room and seemed to be making their way toward the kitchen. Ashley made the grave mistake of glancing in my direction. She locked eyes with mine. Through the entire crowd, we managed to find each other. It was fate. Anyone else would see this as true love. She wishes she could get with someone like me.

I simply could not resist myself. I remembered how much Lauren hurt when she saw those two making out. My hand had a mind of its own. Thank God I’m not a man or else I’d be in prison for so much as thinking that. I let my arm glide down Lauren’s back ever so slowly. My

hand rested on the top of her jeans and stayed there. I didn't care who saw. I didn't care if anyone made a big deal of it.

Seeing Ashley's face made everything worth it. Everything was right with the world.

Ashley stormed off and Katherine was forced to run after her. They actually seemed to be in a good mood before they saw me. I really do not mind that Katherine saw. I knew she already knew. Her relationship with Tracy made it inevitable that she would find out sooner or later. I still intended to keep her close for the election, but I would not shy away from letting her know who was in charge. Katherine was a sweet girl. Very innocent. She strikes me as the type of person to go to AA meetings just because she wants to be scared away from becoming an alcoholic without ever so much as getting blackout drunk once in her life.

"What are you... doing?" Lauren slurred. She *really* needed to pace herself better. "I thought you were... worried someone would... see."

"I can't wait for us to get back to your place," I said, only half-joking. I really wanted to go home. Not for sex, though. Again, she could not give consent to anything.

She stumbled a little bit and I decided for her that she needed a break. I guided her to the couch behind us and gently sat her down. She was not trying to stop me whatsoever, but I know she would rather try to keep partying. When the flashing lights shined on her face, I could see how tired she looked.

"Get some rest. You've earned a break," I ordered.

"You're no fun," she groaned.

I took the blanket draped over the back of the couch and pulled it over her. There was a pillow resting on her feet which I took and placed under her head. I tucked her in like a child.

"I'm not gonna sleep, you know," she said, already getting tired.

"I sincerely doubt that."

When I finished making the bed, I looked up and saw Frank walking a younger girl toward the other side of the living room, maybe no older than thirteen? I could not help but wonder why there was a child at this party, but that was the least of my concerns. Perhaps he was a pedophile that preyed upon middle schoolers and this party was an open secret trafficking ring? A fun story, but highly unlikely. If only I could be so lucky to get these people arrested for something that damning.

I wished Ashley would come out and see me babying her ex. I lived for that level of misery, especially from her. She could have been in this place if not for her own personal demons. She made this bed the same way I just made Lauren's. If she continued to try to go against me, I would continue to knock her down. I was a mountain and she was a mud pie. She will never match up to me. No matter what she does, I will always come out on top.

Spencer

When Frank entered the living room with Megan in tow, I almost dropped the bottle I was holding while I tried to figure out what was going on. What was she doing home so early? How did she even get home? Did her friend's mom drive her home? If she saw what was going on, we'd have the cops on us for sure.

"Mr. President, there's someone here to see you," Frank announced. "I'll just... uh... leave you two alone." He scurried off, grabbing a beer can from the counter as he went by.

"Megan? What are you doing here?! I thought you were staying over with Mary tonight."

"She got the stomach flu and her mom sent me home," she replied. Her helmet was under her arm so I pieced things together without her needing to come out and say it.

"Why didn't you call?" I asked. "I would have driven you."

She glanced at the twenty or so empty bottles of booze on one of the end tables. "Are you sure you're okay to drive tonight?"

I wasn't exactly *hammered*, but I wasn't sober either. It was probably for the best she didn't call. The thought of her getting in trouble while coming home scared me shitless, though. If something had actually happened and I could have prevented her from getting hurt, but I couldn't because I was drunk...

"I'm sorry."

She gave me a genuinely confused look. "What for?"

"For..." I looked back over at the bottles. "This."

Megan took a deep breath and tried to sound as convincing as possible. "You're not our dad. It's okay. It's what teenagers do."

"But not you," I mused.

"Of course not." She smiled.

I was really glad she wasn't angry with me for throwing the party or for drinking or anything. "You hungry? We got pizza in the kitchen."

She followed me through the crowd, which had diminished greatly since midnight. My stomach tensed up when I saw Ashley and Katherine drinking together. I knew another fight was inevitable. I took a deep breath and walked past them to get to the pizza boxes so my baby sister could eat.

"Is anyone in my room?" she asked. I could tell she was genuinely worried someone was up there. She may be thirteen, but I'm sure she knows about the "birds and the bees." I mean, shit, how couldn't she? She uses the same Internet I do. The thought of people screwing in her bed made me ill.

"Shouldn't be," I replied. "Bedrooms are off limits."

"But is it locked?"

"Well I'm not a creep and I haven't tried to go into my little sister's bedroom when she isn't home so I'm gonna say so I'm not sure."

She glared at me. "I'm not disinfecting my whole bed frame again like last time," she warned me. "I'm gonna go listen to music. If someone's in there, I'm calling you and Frank."

"If anyone tries to bother you—"

"I'll kill 'em."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. The thought of this little five-foot-nothing girl who weighs a hundred pounds soaking wet actually hurting a fly was hilarious to me. She still needs me to kill the spiders that crawl into her room. She reached into the last pizza box with anything inside of it and took out the last two slices. Hurrying off into the party, I was tempted to follow after her to make sure she got to her room safely. I stopped when Ashley turned and saw us.

Megan smiled and stopped in front of Ashley. "Hey Ash!"

For whatever reason, Megan absolutely adored Ashley. I guess she thought of her as an older sister or something. She'd only known her for a few months, but she considered her to be a really close friend. Maybe even an older sister. It might be because Ashley was in high school and she treated her like an adult. Seeing her absolutely brightened her day whenever Ash came around.

It really hurt to know that I'd have to break the news that we were going to break up for good soon. I took some solace that the room was dark and she couldn't see how hammered Ashley probably was at that point. I don't want her to see her the way some of the people at my school saw her.

Ashley was as shocked as I was to see her. "Megan? What are you doing here?"

"Going up to bed. If you want to talk, I'll be up for a little!" She pointed back at me. "Not like I can get any sleep with *this guy* throwing parties every other week." Pizza in hand and a snarky little grin on her face, Megan skipped off to her room.

Ashley shuffled over to me and oh boy, could I tell she was pissed. "Why is your little sister here?"

"Her friend got sick and she had to come home," I told her gently, not wanting to start more shit.

"And you let her bike home in the middle of the night?"

Christ she sounds like her mother... I missed Mom...

"It's only a couple blocks." Oof. Okay. Wrong answer. Damage control time. "I told her that she can call me if she ever needs a ride home. She was worried about us getting busted by the cops if her friend's mom drove her home and she didn't want me driving drunk."

"Call her an Uber."

Brad approached us, thankfully breaking the tension. I could have kissed him for that. "Dude, was that your little sister?" he asked.

"Uh... yeah..."

He laughed and reached for the pizza. "Alrighty then." He fumbled with the stack of boxes, trying to find something to eat. Tom, Jason and the others rushed in and joined him, tossing boxes aside left and right in search of anything for their marijuana-fueled hunger pains.

"Dude, there's no pizza left," Tom complained.

“Sorry.”

I could see Ashley was still glaring at me. Whether it was because Megan was at a high school party or because of the fight or a combination of the two, I wasn't sure. Probably the third one, but girls are difficult to read. I figured if there was ever a time to talk things over, it was probably right now. I motioned for her to join me on the other side of the room.

“So, hey, um... could we... you know... talk?”

Ashley didn't respond to me. Instead, she looked back at Katherine, who was making a disgusted face while she tried to drink a cup of beer. “Do you need a water?”

Katherine nodded her head quickly and forced herself to swallow the beer. “Yes, please.”

She took Kate's cup and walked over to Brad. “Hey, get me some water. And more beer, too. She's thirsty.” Brad nodded to her and took her cups to be refilled. For a second, I thought he gave Katherine a little wink, but I could be wrong. It was pretty dark. Besides I was more concerned with getting Ashley to talk to again. When she got mad, it was basically impossible.

“Look, I'm really sorry about earlier,” I told her, forgetting about trying to speak to her alone. “I shouldn't have yelled at you.”

“It's fine.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?” I asked, hoping we could get a moment alone.

“I said it's *fine*. Just drop it.”

It was a losing battle. I gave up. Looking back, I should have tried to do something. Things may have been so different if I had just started another fight and distracted her long enough to change her train of thought.

Brad handed the cups back to Ashley and she turned back to Katherine without so much as a thank you. I shrugged at Brad, who didn't seem very hurt that she didn't thank him for his troubles. She handed Katherine the water while keeping the beer for herself.

“You're right, this stuff tastes like piss,” Ashley muttered as they entered the living room and walked away.

“Trouble in paradise, huh?” Brad shot me a little grin.

God, read the room guy.

“Yeah.”

I reached for the keg Brad had used to fill Ashley's cup with an empty one of my own I took from the little sleeve on the counter. I needed a drink and fast. Brad offered his cup up to mine before I could drink and we shared a toast. Whether it was because we were teammates or friends or in the room together watching Ashley self-destruct, I didn't know and I didn't care. He might be a jackass, but it was nice to have someone beside me.

It was still the most depressing toast of my life.

Beth

The middle school girl returned from the kitchen and walked towards the main hallway with a couple slices of pizza in her hand. This time, I could not stop myself from wondering who she was. I turned to Lauren, who was resting beside me. “Who was that little kid?”

Lauren looked over my leg and saw her right before she could get out of sight. Her eyes could barely focus. “Probably Spencer’s little sister. Megan. She’s cool.”

Noted. “Was she here this whole time?” Lauren shrugged.

The idea of Spencer throwing a massive party and letting his little sister, who was presumably only twelve or thirteen, hang around was extremely irresponsible. Was it something I could use against him in the election? Something to ruin his credibility?

Local Teen Throws Rager, Lets Kid Sister Get Drunk and High With Teens

No. That would never work. Only a few of us even acknowledged her presence so they would not believe she was actually here and the ones who did would never sell Spencer out to the cops. The party had been extremely successful and there were many more to come. Why would anyone want their party hub shut down because of a little girl happening to be around for one? Maybe this was a regular occurrence so they would be used to it by now and I was making a big deal out of nothing. Equally unlikely, but it was a thought to consider.

The thought of calling the police to shut down one of his parties did cross my mind. Watching all these losers be taken away in handcuffs or run for the hills when the blue and red lights started flashing was quite invigorating. This idea died upon conception when I considered the city, despite being one of the largest in Texas, would never allow a local football star to see legal trouble for his part in a high school party, especially a filthy stinking rich one. I would need something bigger to sink this boy. My options were open for whatever. But the law was not the answer. Fuck the legal system.

I stood up and stretched my legs. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Lauren smiled at me. “Beth going to the bathroom. The *Bethroom*.”

She was adorable when drunk. I was tempted to ask one of the local meatheads to watch over her, but I was worried they would take advantage of her while I was away. The thought of bashing someone over the head with a fire poker to prevent a drunken hookup was exciting, but not worth my time. I would have to place my faith in Lauren’s personal standards and hope she would not cheat on me while under the influence of alcohol.

Walking through the house allowed me to admire just how big it was from the inside. He might be a rich little shit jock, but his family had good taste in architecture. Spencer’s Father had a den with a pool table and giant widescreen TV mounted on the wall right beside the dining room. The liquor cabinet with the expensive whiskeys was a nice touch. It reminded me of the room from the end of American Pie where Stifler’s mom gets her brains banged out by a teenager. It was all very fancy. Very classy.

There were so many rooms and closets. Unfortunately, the one bathroom downstairs was currently occupied and I was forced to climb to the second floor.

Much like the first floor, the second floor had a number of rooms. Five, to be exact. Two on either side of the hallway and one at the far end. I checked every door and many of them had pieces of paper taped to them. Each custom sign had a note written for any would-be intruders.

MY DAD'S BEDROOM - DO NOT ENTER
MY BEDROOM - EVEN THINK ABOUT IT
MY SISTER'S BEDROOM - TRY IT. SEE WHAT HAPPENS.

I could hear some music playing inside little sister Megan's room. It sounded like the soundtrack to a Broadway musical rather than the deafening Top 40 pop rap country trash was blaring downstairs throughout the night. Deciding not to see what exactly would happen if I dared open the door, I passed the room by.

I checked inside the fourth room. It was another private study with a small library and desktop computer inside. I quickly shut it, though it was very interesting to see how Spencer's Father lived. I did not know much about the man, except he was not around much. He had an extensive alcohol collection, ranging from whiskeys to wines, and lots of Dallas Cowboys memorabilia. Besides this, I knew little of the man who created my girlfriend's political enemy.

By process of elimination, I was left with the room at the end of the hall. The door swung open when I was only five weeks away, giving me the fright of my life. Two teens, a nerdy looking boy and a girl out of his league, stepped out holding hands. Their smiles were wide and their brows glistened with sweat. It took little effort on my part to deduce what they had been doing before I arrived.

"Hey, is there a bathroom in there?" I asked. They instantly got embarrassed for being caught and rushed past me, nearly running me over. "Watch it..."

Annoyed, I checked inside to see if there was an adjoining bathroom. With no sign on the door and a bedroom in the center of the floor, I correctly guessed this was a guest room. There were large plastic and cardboard boxes piled along the walls. Spencer's Father must have needed a storage space. The bed itself was a mess now that it had been... used... by the previous occupants. I would venture to guess that those two were not the first couple or group to use that bed that night.

I was delighted to find I was right, as usual, when I saw the light of a bathroom glowing from the far left side of the room. Despite the door being ajar, I gave a gentle knock to warn anyone snorting or sucking that I planned to enter. No one replied so I entered and locked the door behind me.

There was a small stack of magazines and books beside the toilet for the user's convenience. As much as I would have loved to learn about gardening tips from two years ago, I decided it would be best to just finish up and get back to my girlfriend. What were gardening magazines doing in this house of all places? Was that a requirement for rich people?

The bedroom door swung open and smacked into the wall. I jumped as I pulled my jeans back up, nearly falling over from shock. What was it with people scaring me shitless that night?

The thought of dealing with another couple in the middle of fornication was sickening. I prepared to make myself known to the new inhabitants of the room. But, out of curiosity, I listened in to see if I could deduce who was on the other side of the bathroom door based on their voices alone. There was no sound.

I quietly undid the lock and, with the stealth skills of a ninja, pushed the door ever so quietly outward. Through the smallest crack possible, I saw someone lying on their stomach. They were passed out cold on the bed beneath them.

It took only a look at the girl's disheveled light brown hair to realize it was Ashley.

I must admit, it was fairly delicious to see her so fucked up. After a night of poor choices and a major fight with her boyfriend, she must be all tuckered out. She looked like she was sleeping so peacefully. I was almost worried about disturbing her slumber. Almost. Deciding I had had enough schadenfreude for one night, I went back to wash my hands before I intended to splash water on her face and run like a child. Unlike the gross pig in the other room, I actually had standards.

There was a gentle knock at the bedroom door. It was hard to understand what the person said as they entered, but I swore I heard the person say, "Katherine? You in there?"

Though I could not recognize the voice, I knew it was a man. I quickly shut the water off and dried my hands on my jeans. I crept back over to the door and peered through the crack I had left. A tall, wide figure stepped into the room and studied the girl on the bed beneath him.

Ashley stirred on the bed. I thought she had passed out, but she was just resting. She groaned and rubbed her forehead. "Shit! What are..." He turned and looked around the room. I retreated back away from the door and only saw him from the side of his face, but I recognized that mammoth chin anywhere.

Brad huffed with frustration and headed back out the door.

I didn't hear the door shut or footsteps echo through the hallway so dared not leave my hiding spot. This was a wise decision because Brad stepped back into frame. I placed my hand over my mouth to stifle my breathing. Just to be safe. I made absolutely certain I was as silent as a church mouse. Thankfully, Brad did not approach the bathroom with the lights on. His gaze was transfixed on Ashley. He was too far off to the side so I was unable to see his face, but I knew he was studying her. Taking in every detail.

Then he shut the door.

Then he took a chair from the corner of the room and propped it under the doorknob.

Then he turned Ashley over on the bed, never taking his eyes off of her.

Then he hesitated.

Ashley continued to groan. I could see her weakly struggling on the bed. Even if she was sober she was going anywhere. She was helpless now.

I knew exactly what was going on. I pressed my hand even harder against my mouth. My heart was racing. I was worried that it would be my word against his. I needed proof. Using every ounce of courage in me, I pushed the door open just a fraction more so I could get a better view. I prayed to a God I didn't believe in that the hinges wouldn't squeak. If it did, he'd kill me.

With his entire body in frame, I reached into my back pocket. I took out my second phone, my flip phone, and took pictures. Thank God the flash was turned off or her certainly would have killed me. After I took a number of pictures of him standing over the bed and then sitting on top of Ashley, I tried to close the door as quietly as possible. He seemingly didn't react so I could only assume he didn't hear me, though I thought I was being as loud as an elephant.

I had to act fast. I searched around the room for anything, *anything*. I settled on a guided three-pronged candlestick resting on the counter. Taking the candles out, I raised the makeshift weapon and gave the door a small push outward.

He didn't hear me. He was too busy struggling to take off Ashley's dress.

I thought I was going to be sick. I wondered if I could take him in a fight. If I caught him unaware, I might get a lucky shot in. But I wouldn't be able to do more than stun him. The only way I could land a knockout blow is if he couldn't hear me exit the bathroom and I hit him on the back of the head and kept hitting him until he either passed out or I caved his fucking skull in. Would this candlestick hold up that long? And then, if and when it breaks, could I escape in time? There's a chair blocking the exit. I'd need to pull it away, possibly unlock the door, open it, and run. Would I be able to do all of this? My hands were shaking so badly and my chest was on fire. If I missed just one of these steps, he'd kill me. He couldn't let this secret get out. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck I'm going to die and I didn't even get to tell Lauren how much I truly love her.

Ashley tried to resist what was happening, though she was clearly too out of it to put up anything remotely resembling a fight. "Mmm... What are you... doing?"

Brad glanced over his right shoulder at the door. He was paranoid. Someone could be listening in right now and he wouldn't know it. Deciding he was safe, he continued pulling the dress over her head, revealing the lacy underwear she probably stole from Victoria's Secret.

Ashley muttered something I couldn't hear. I strained to try to hear the end of it, but could only make out "don't wanna" before she stopped talking.

Brad paused. "Who..." He tossed the dress across the room. "Shh, shh," he cooed. "Just go to sleep. Just sleep..."

Before she stopped talking and finally passed out, she said one phrase loud enough that even I could hear it in the bathroom. There was no mistaking what she had said.

"Mmm... Lauren... come on... tired..."

It took a moment to register what she said. I was too focused on crushing Brad Kendrick's skull like an egg that fell off the counter. If the room wasn't so quiet, I'd have never even realized she spoke at all.

I blinked.

My heart rate slowed down. So I relaxed a little.

My breath steadied. So I uncovered my mouth.

My arm felt heavy. So I lowered the candlestick.

With my free hand, I took out my phone. And I snapped a few more pictures.

My ego was satisfied. So I put the phone back in my pocket.

And then I gently, ever so gently, shut the door.

I had everything I needed. Nothing else mattered. Let it be.

“Ashley? You in here?” I could hear someone yelling from outside the bedroom door. I craned my neck to make out who it was. It was a girl. I thought I knew the voice, but it was too muffled. My ears rang when the chair that was supposed to prevent intruders crashed to the floor as someone entered the room. “OH MY GOD!” There was a thud. Loud footsteps echoed through the hallway and faded out of earshot. The new intruder remained. “Ashley! Are you okay?! Wake up, please! Wake up!”

My heart sank. I knew the voice as soon as she spoke again. It was Lauren.

“Don’t worry, you’re gonna be okay! Holy shit... holy shit, holy shit, oh fuck, oh fuck”

I heard a few footsteps approach the bed, then Lauren hesitated, then she ran off down the hallway. I could not hear anything after this. Yet I remained inside the bathroom. Fear of being caught as a witness to an attempted rape was too much to bear. I feared being caught more than dying. I am not afraid of death. I do fear how this would hurt Lauren more than it has. I could not defend her without outing my near-involvement in the crime.

My mind was already formulating a plan. An out.

After a minute passed, five excruciatingly long minutes without so much as a peep from the partygoers, I realized I had to make a decision. I could either stay here and possibly be caught from whoever Lauren seeks out for help... or I could make a run for it and hope I would avoid detection. If no one had arrived by now, I wondered if and when someone would.

As I cracked the door open, I saw only Ashley in the room. From where I was standing, I heard no footsteps from the hallway. I assumed this was my best chance.

I paused at the foot of the bed. I stood right where Brad stood a few minutes ago. I studied her the way Brad had studied her. And I took pictures. Lots and lots of pictures. Little digital souvenirs from the party. As much as it pains me to admit, Ashley had an even better body than Lauren. I made sure to take the most flattering snapshots possible. She earned it with how much effort she’d put into maintaining it.

When I determined I had more than enough proof of what had happened here tonight, I turned and marched out of the room. No one stopped me. Nobody was there. I wasted a solid minute formulating a lie that I had stumbled upon her while searching for the bathroom. I shut the door behind me. I found myself at the staircase. I felt like Cinderella making her grand entrance when I returned to the party. No one missed me or even noticed I was gone.

I felt like there was a bowling ball in my pocket. I made sure to focus all of my attention on making sure my phone stayed in my pocket. If it even so much as shifted, I picked up on it. That phone contained everything I would ever need. Those pictures were my lifeblood. The centerpiece of my masterplan. I did not have the fine details yet, but they would come.

I would never forget this night for as long as I lived.

MEMORIES

Spencer

Being told I was destined for greatness could have ruined me. It should have. I was just a kid and I was expected to be my father's meal ticket for the rest of his life. My life has been planned out for me since I was old enough to speak. I've never had a say.

Back when I was seven, I was basically running the house when my dad wasn't home. He told me that I was never allowed to tell anyone I was home alone for hours after school with my baby sister. We were far too young to be alone, but I managed. I basically had to raise myself. Just look at me now.

I was sitting in the living room watching TV with my sister. Megan was only four at the time. She didn't care that I was watching a Brett Favre documentary. She only cared about playing with her dolls. It was almost midnight, but it was a Friday so we weren't exactly worried about being caught staying up late. That was my first mistake. In the middle of the movie, my attention turned to the main hallway. The sound of someone fumbling with the doorknob gave me anxiety every single time he came home.

My dad came stumbling in, dropping the keys on the hardwood floor as he struggled to pull them from the lock. He cursed under his breath, but it echoed all the way into the living room. He's the guy who taught me how to swear. His one actual gift to me.

He didn't realize we were in the room until he flicked on the fan. "Christ, what are you still doing up?"

Deciding to be a "good parent" and make sure his children were in bed on time, he walked over to manually shut the TV off. He paused when he saw that a football game was on. The documentary was showing the famous shot of Favre after he threw the touchdown to Andre Rison. It was always one of my favorite sports moments growing up. I prayed to whatever god was listening to let me experience that level of happiness since the first time I saw it.

"Brett Favre?" he asked with slurred speech, eyes fixed on the screen. His anger that we were still awake had subsided. He couldn't help but be hypnotized by the game of football, regardless of who was playing. Except the 49ers. *Never* the 49ers.

"Megan, go to your room," he ordered. She stood and took her doll, Suzie, with her.

He sat down beside me on the couch. He liked to consider watching football "bonding time," which I guess it was by definition. But the key difference is he didn't acknowledge me or discuss the fine points of the game or how to be a better player. He played three years in high school and he thinks he's Vince Lombardi. He couldn't teach a blind man how to run into a wall.

The more he watched, the more annoyed he got. "What a shit game. Yo-you know why they won that? Well, shit, why would you? I don't think you were even born yet. They won because Bledsoe sucks shit. Two words: Over. Rated. Worse than Bradshaw, Unitas, Marino, all of those so-called *greats*. I mean how do you go down from Quincy Carter and Chad Hutchinson to *Drew Bledsoe*? We *had* '05! We fuckin' had it! But Bledsoe and his little butt buddy Parcells went and threw it away."

He spat on the floor. His hatred of the Parcells/Bledsoe connection is well known in local sports bars and among our neighbors and his circle of friends. He never got over them failing to reach the playoffs in 2005 and never winning a playoff game under his leadership during his time with the team. It'd been years and he still hated them for it. Strong words for a guy who rode the bench for most of his time as a "varsity athlete."

"You want a real quarterback to fawn over, you look at Manning. Peyton, not his dopey dead-eyed little brother. Last year was a fluke, never doubt that. That guy knows how to lead a team. He's everything we should have. If Jerry was smart, he'd offer him every penny he's got so that guy could jump ship and lead this team. He already looks great in blue and white." He shook his head. "You still wanna to be a quarterback one day, kid?"

He didn't so much as look at me, but he knew how I was going to respond. I was already the quarterback for our Pop Warner team and was going to try out for the job at our grade school when I got into fourth grade, the first grade where we could participate in organized sports. Ever since I was able to hold a football, I was told I was going to be the quarterback. The Captain.

"You be like Peyton," he ordered. "You learn to lead. Don't expect anyone to bail you out like Eli or that fatfuck Jerome Bettis when Vanderjagt missed that chipshot. *You* are the only one you can trust. No one else. Everyone else will try to screw you over. Don't give them that chance. Put the little shits in their place and lead them. You hear me?"

I quickly nodded. Even though I was young, I still understood what he was saying. It's probably why I had such problems making friends when I was little. My only real friend was Frank and his dad was almost as much of a douchebag as my own.

"Get me some water and go to bed. It's too late for you to be up."

By the time I got back, he had already passed out. I didn't understand what alcohol was, but I knew it made him very angry and very sleepy. I put the water on the end table for when he woke up and hurried off to bed. I didn't add ice. He didn't deserve it.

I have a recurring nightmare that pops up every couple months.

I'm playing football and the game is on the line. I need to make the game winning pass or everyone will hate me. The spectators and players would change every year, depending on who I was in school with. I still remember some of the guys from grade school and they'd appear on the field every so often. But it was mostly high school people now. I take the snap, drop back, and I see someone wide open downfield. I mean this person couldn't be more open if they tried. So I go to pass... and nothing happens. My arm can't move. It's like I'm paralyzed. I'm trapped in one place and everyone is yelling at me and booing me and laughing at me and calling me dirty names and then the big defensive lineman rushes straight at me and takes my head off. I wake up drenched in sweat and cry like a baby because I'm half-asleep and feel like a loser.

Anytime I'm doing poorly on the field, this dream plays out in my head over and over and over and I can't focus on the game going on in front of me. It's like someone is controlling my body and making me fail and I hate myself more and more for it every time it happens.

I had that dream again the night after I heard about Ashley going missing.

Ashley

I'm by no means an anorexic, but seeing that cake made me want to vomit.

It was a German chocolate cake, my mom's favorite. Whenever she decided to make it, it was like a science. It was a form of art. No less than three layers. If and when we had extra that wouldn't fit in a container, we brought the rest to the neighbors. They always loved us for it. Little five year old me struggling to ring the doorbell and almost dropping the tupperware container as I tried to pass it to the faceless neighbors who had either died or moved away years ago must have been such an adorable sight. Who can say no to a free German chocolate cake, especially when a doe-eyed little girl is hand-delivering it to you? I always wondered why they called it that. There was never chocolate in Germany. It came from the Americas. Apparently some guy from Texas named Samuel German invented it. Go figure.

I thought my mom had a heart attack when I opened the sliding glass door in the kitchen. She practically jumped right out of her shoes. Thankfully she wasn't wearing any or they'd have ended up in the next county.

"Jesus, Ash, you scared me half to death," she exclaimed, trying to catch her breath.

"Sorry! Forgot my keys."

She laughed as she caught her breath. "Please just... knock next time. Okay?"

I couldn't respond. My attention was transfixed on the cake now that I had seen it. It was like a fly in the soup or a smudge of dirt on someone's face. How could I not stare at it? "Looks good," I finally said. I was horrendously unconvincing, but she didn't seem to pick up on this.

"Want some?"

"No," I replied a little too quickly and loudly. "Thank you."

She shrugged and went back to preparing the next layer, carefully spreading out the coconut frosting. She was going for a four-decker this time around. The neighbors would be eating good tomorrow. "You have fun tonight?" She was speaking over her shoulder.

"Yeah, it was alright." I fetched my keys from the hook beside the door and tried to escape to my room before she could ask questions.

Me and my Mom have a good relationship. I think so, anyway. Sure we have disagreements and fights, but they never last long. Lately we've been getting closer. Since she and dad split up, she'd needed someone to talk to. I try to keep a healthy space between us so I can live my own life, but she needed me. I couldn't leave her. Very hypocritical to say because I was trying my damndest to avoid conversation tonight, I know.

"Were you with Lauren?" she asked.

Just hearing that name made me tense up. I froze like a deer in headlights. If I didn't answer soon, she might have suspected something. It was all my fault. I brought this on myself. Of all days, why did she choose that day to make that goddamn cake?

"What? No... no, it was Spencer. The quarterback."

She turned with a wide smile on her face. "Good for you!"

My face flushed bright red with embarrassment. "Mom!"

"You deserve a quarterback," she said with a wink.

"It's not like that," I swore. I wasn't wrong. He wouldn't officially ask me out until that dumb party. That stupid betting pool was about to earn people a shitload of money. "Casey and Heather were there, too. And Casey brought Tom, he's on the team with Spencer. And Spencer's best friend was there, Frank. And Brad..."

Why did mentioning Brad make me feel sick?

She turned back to finish her cake. "So tell me about this Spencer... is he cute?"

"Mom, seriously—"

She laughed. "I'm just kidding."

"If you must know," I responded with as much snarky bullshit as I could muster, "he's very nice. He asked me and the girls to hang out on Saturday at his place."

She tensed up. I should have realized something was wrong. Why didn't I just tell her I was tired and go to my room? "Oh. *This* Saturday?" she asked. Her voice wavered.

"Yeah, why?"

She turned back to face me for the last time. "We um... we have a meeting with Hector."

"Who's Hector?"

"Hector is my lawyer..."

I knew instantly what was coming. I had been dreading this moment since they sat me down and announced the split. "Mom, no..."

She took a step forward to close the distance between us. She spoke as sweetly as possible to make me less afraid. It didn't work. I recoiled away. "We just need to talk for a couple hours, but I promise you'll be able to hangout with your boyfriend after—"

"I'm not doing this."

Before I knew it, I was up in my room. I didn't slam my door, but I shut it very aggressively. I felt the tears streaming down my face. I felt my chest tighten up. I lost all control of my body and collapsed to my knees. I curled into a ball. A sad, pathetic ball with soon-to-be divorced parents, an ex who hates me, and a bunch of friends who didn't care if I lived or died.

I don't know why I chose to go straight to my desk, or how I even summoned up the strength to do so, but I did. I pulled the pencil case out of the back of the sliding drawer and emptied the contents onto the desk. Beneath the pens and erasers and pencils was the little stamp bags I had left over from Kylie's party. Kara spotted me again. Being her friend had so many perks. I told myself I would save them for a rainy day. Touching my cheeks revealed that it was pouring.

I felt like I could conquer the planet. I was God. This world meant nothing to me. It took everything in me to not break down my door. I could march up to that fuckwad divorce lawyer and tell him that my parents will stay together no matter what and I'll fucking kill him if he tries to stop me and anyone who bet that I would let Spencer fuck me would get theirs too and so would Beth and so would Lauren and so would Frank and Brad and Tom and Hardy and O'Reilly and that movie and that motherfucking cake and anyone else who gets in my way.

Fuck them all. I'm fucking invincible.

Beth

My first day at Arlington City High was a blur. I'd never been so nervous in my entire life. Going from a school with a few hundred people in it to a school that had actual thousands of people. Thousands of people that I didn't know. Thousands of people who were going to walk right over me when I walked through those doors on the first Tuesday of the new year. Only the Freshmen had to show up on the first Monday so I got an extra day to be anxious. Lucky me.

I never wanted to move. My Mom made us. She basically uprooted my life for a few extra dollars, which is funny because she was almost never home and I basically had to provide for myself on the monthly allowance she gives me. It's not like I had any friends to lose or anything, but at least I *knew* everyone and everyone *knew* me. A couple hundred people I could name forwards, backwards, and sideways. Perfect. But down here? There's no one like me. There is no chance of even possibly knowing a single person there that I can latch onto because of some remote interest we share or some other factor that brings us together.

Entering a room full of total strangers is the most mortifying thing ever. When I had to sit in for that dodgeball game at the beginning of the year with all 2,000 people that my Mom swore were all just like me, I tried my best not to rub elbows with anyone. There was no shortage of potential "friends" in the room, but I was petrified out there. I felt like my face was in a perpetual state of looking like Carrie White when she burned down the gym.

Shock and horror and anger and loneliness.

One thing I've always been proud of was my power of observation. I put it to good use when I began to learn the backstories of the most important people around campus. The ones I either wanted to attempt to befriend for safety or avoid entirely like the plague. The two that stuck out the most were Charles Bruxton and Kara Alderman. I was kinda shocked they weren't dating because they were clearly the most popular people in the entire school.

Charles was the star wide receiver of the team. I'm talking about a potential NFL talent. He was a much more benevolent king. He was much more approachable and accepting of the non-populars. I think he was just building his own little "brand" so he would look good on Twitter in a few years when he was in award contention or a selection in the NFL Draft. I never had a positive interaction with him, but that is mostly up to the interactions with his inner circle all being negative and his refusing to set them straight. Brad Kendrick, Frank Newman, Spencer Barnett. All assholes.

Where Charles was the benevolent monarch everyone could look up to, Kara was the real bigshot around school. The stereotypical Head Cheerleader turned up to ten. She could not suffer anyone below her station trying to befriend her. She had her own status quo that she kept as though it were orthodox religious doctrine.

Her little band of enablers weren't any better. Kylie Washington was her "Co-Captain" in the sense that she was always beside her when she dumped her pop on some Freshman guy's lap for asking out one of the cheerleaders without her permission. There were also the likes of Stacey Milner, Brooke Nguyen, and Elena Acevedo and her very pretty black hair. Ashley

Williams occupied the other spot at Kara's side. I correctly guessed she was her little pet project. I wouldn't find out about how unrepentantly evil she was until a few weeks later.

I felt trapped. Alone. I didn't know how to make friends and this school was the kinda place where you either were in a crowd or you were easy pickings for the people around you. There was no real anti-bullying initiative around the school. Just some prevention methods they flaunted to the PTA that were immediately ignored if the bully wore a letterman jacket. Principal Patrick was a massive hypocrite.

I still don't know how I survived my first day. I thought my chest was going to explode the entire time I was there as I endured the first of many anxiety attacks while kneeling upon those filthy unwashed bathroom floors.

Katherine

My family has a tradition that could best be described as the antithesis of the guy from Forrest Gump. Like how in the movie, Lieutenant Dan talks about how he comes from a family of military men who are destined to die on the battlefield. I guess my family is kinda like that, but we don't kill anyone or get killed performing our jobs. Not yet, anyway.

I thought that my Grandfather just happened to be a lawyer and my Dad took up the job as well, but it goes much further than that. After doing one of those family trees, it turns out my family has been practicing law since the late 1700's when they emigrated from Normandy, France. Three hundred years of lawyers in some weird unbroken line. At least one member of our family has performed the job each generation since before the American Revolution.

And something we also discovered was that we've had a member of our family involved in many important legal moments in history, for better or worse. We had an ancestor who was an early House Representative that argued against continuing slavery after we won the Revolution, we had one who served in the Senate before the Civil War began and helped negotiate the Compromise of 1850 (Unfortunately for the Southern side so that slavery would continue.), another guy who served as legal council for perennial Presidential election loser William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution of the Scopes Monkey Trial (Again, yuck. Why are my family such assholes?), and my grandfather helped prosecute leading Mafia officials during the Mafia Commission Trials in the 80's, though Rudy Giuliani got all of the credit.

Even though we weren't always on the right side of history, I do admire my family for somehow finding a way to be involved in major historical events.

So, being the only child, I got the talk that every firstborn Duvall got the day they became a teenager. I was expected to become a lawyer and follow in my family's footsteps. My Dad would use his connections to help me secure a spot in an Ivy League school, which would hopefully be Harvard, but Yale and Brown were acceptable substitutes, and I would become some big politician or Attorney General that got her very own Wikipedia article without a profile picture that nobody will ever read outside of hour-long binges that result in them randomly stumbling across me. Maybe I'd be lucky and get to prosecute some bigshot millionaire who ripped off shareholders in a stock scam which leads to a losing bid for Governor where I end up with less than thirty percent of the vote during the Primary.

It's not like I can't make it as a lawyer or anything. I get straight A's and never miss school. I just sometimes wonder if it's something I'm cut out to do. The money would be amazing and having so much family history will make it easier to find a job out of school. It'd be nice to be a politician and actually try to help people, though. I don't know. It's what my parents want so I guess I can get used to the idea.

My priority is making them happy. That's what matters most.

Ashley

A couple months before Spencer asked me out, all of us were hanging out at Spencer's place eating pizza and playing Cards Against Humanity. If you would have told me that my former girlfriend and my future boyfriend would be in the room at the same time, I'd have laughed in your face. Never in a million years would I think I'd be dating Spencer in a couple weeks. Me and Lauren were in love. We were going to college together. It was all so simple.

This was also before Casey and Tom started dating. We had been pushing for it since they first met during her Sophomore year. This was around the time Michelle and Frank almost dated. I'm still not sure if they hooked up or not. Michelle wouldn't admit it if she had. They were staring at each other practically all night. They never said why they didn't end up together.

The night was going well. I won four games in a row because I'm a filthy rat bastard with no morals.

"Hey, Spence," Casey said, nodding at the hallway.

Standing on the stairs, peeking over the railing, was Spencer's little sister. Megan was only twelve at the time. Seeing all these high schoolers in her living room must have been a major culture shock. We almost never went over Spencer's house.

"Megan, what are you doing?" Spencer asked, trying to play cool in front of us.

"You know you're not supposed to have friends over when Dad isn't home," Megan called out. She was the little sister. She had no problem embarrassing her big brother in front of his friends.

"Are you gonna tell him?"

Megan rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "I won't if we can get some ice cream."

"We're... kinda busy here."

Spencer had just gotten his license. I'm sure having an older brother who could drive meant that she exploited him for anything and everything. I don't have any siblings so I didn't get to experience this.

"I could go for ice cream," I announced. I winked up at Megan, who blushed.

"Ice cream sounds good," Heather chimed in.

"Ooooooh ice cream." Lauren was trying not to laugh. I smirked at her as we forced this poor guy to buy us free food.

"I guess it's settled," Frank said as he stood up. "I'll grab the keys."

"And I think since Spencer wants to be such a good host, he can buy tonight," I added. "Whatever we want."

I helped Lauren to her feet and we all made for the door. I motioned for Megan to follow us. Her eyes lit up. She was so happy to spend time with all of us. I think this was the moment she started to think of me as an older sister. How we would all fit inside Spencer's truck, I didn't know. But it didn't matter. We were having fun.

This was the first time I ever met the girl I'd consider to be a surrogate sister. I feel like an ass for thinking I'd really never see her again after that so I never thought about how that little ice cream interaction would end up making us become so close later. We wouldn't meet again

until Spencer and I started dating. Megan and I grew thick as thieves after that day when he brought me home and formally introduced me to her.

About two months later, Megan and I were sprawled out on her bed. It was a long day and I was exhausted, but she asked me to come over and talk. I couldn't say no to her.

"You know you're overthinking this, right?" I asked, half-joking and half-serious.

"You think so?" She was really concerned. I could tell just how much this meant to her.

"Meg, you're barely thirteen. You don't even know what a date is." Words of wisdom from a sixteen year old who spent the entirety of her first relationship sneaking around with her girlfriend and having totally-not-date dates.

"I do, too!"

I smiled and shook my head. "Alright then. Tell me exactly what an evening of romance is to you. What exactly does he want to do with you?"

"We talked about going mini golfing," she said before being hit with a wave of disappointment. She could tell I wasn't taking this as seriously as her and also that I was right. Dating in middle school? It was never gonna last.

"Well that sounds very sweet." I reached out to hold her hands. "But are you sure you're ready to take this from just hanging out with a friend into being an actual, real date? You're still very young. Are you sure you're ready for dating?"

"But what if nobody ever wants to date me again? No guy has ever asked me out before."

"Trust me," I assured her, "guys aren't the only thing in the world. And if you're *really* that worried about it, just remember what I said. You're still so young. You have your whole life to meet guys who will cut off their legs for a chance to be with you."

She finally cracked a smile, but she still wasn't totally convinced yet. "Spencer says there's guys lined up trying to date you."

"And I don't care for any of them. Just because a guy asks you out doesn't mean you automatically have to say yes. You don't owe anybody anything."

"Carly Foster had four guys ask her out last week and she said yes to all of them!"

I chuckled. "I'm sure she's going to be everyone's favorite in high school." I continued to hold her hand. "Don't compare yourself to anyone and don't think your only value is how many guys want to... kiss you." I had to stop myself from telling the truth. She's going to be a beautiful woman one day. The thought of some guy using her and then throwing her away killed me. "You're your own person. As long as you love yourself, it's going to be okay."

Megan lunged forward and wrapped me in a tight embrace, her small boney little arms digging into my ribs. It hurt, but I didn't mind. It felt nice to have someone show they cared. Sometimes it felt like Lauren only hugged me because it was her duty or something. Like she was being forced to.

And she is gone now...

"Thank you so much for becoming my friend," she murmured into my shoulder.

"I'm glad we're friends, too," I replied.

Megan would reach out to me whenever she needed help or advice all throughout the summer. I think she quietly encouraged him to ask me to come over so she'd have an excuse to talk to me more often. She even hinted as much one night when we were talking while Spencer and Frank were screwing around in the backyard.

"You know, I didn't think he'd actually do it," she said while we drank lemonade.

"Do what?"

"Ask you out." She smiled. "He wouldn't shut up about how nervous he was before the party. He thought you'd say no."

I laughed. "Why would he think that?"

"Because you haven't dated anybody that asked you out before. He told me he wondered if you would make an exception for him. He thought he wasn't good enough for you."

This one hurt. I had been dating Lauren for so long up to that point. Of course I wasn't going to go on dates with people who asked me out. I would never have cheated on her, even if it was something as minuscule as going to dinner with some guy once to make people think I wasn't a total ice queen. Kara thought I was just waiting for marriage and respected that. Did Spencer think I was a total prude or something? Or did he think I just had exceptionally high standards?

I think it's kinda funny that I spent more time hanging out with her than I ever spent with their father. Spencer kept me and him at arm's length if he could help it. He was not a fan of his father, to put it mildly. I'm sure he was glad his father was rarely home. Between business that took him out of state and his apparent gambling addiction, he didn't need to be home all the time. As long as Spencer had the money to look after himself and his sister, that was all that mattered. I doubt Spencer had an issue with him being away all the time. We almost never spoke of him. It was probably for the best.

The one time I had dinner at their place when he was home, I found Spencer's father to be rather... obnoxious. He went on and on about Spencer's college football aspirations and how he was going to be a million dollar quarterback one day. I couldn't tell if he was bragging about his son or checking to see how I'd react to the prospect of dating an NFL player. I'd assume it was both. He didn't seem like he held women in high regard.

"So what are you going to do when you graduate high school?" he asked between long sips of his beer.

This was the question I had been dreading. In truth, I have no idea what I want to go to school for. I've been asked this question for so long and I still don't know. I still have a whole two school years to decide. Still though, the sense of impending doom scared me and having my boyfriend's dad asking me what I wanted to do made my heart beat faster and faster.

"Oh, you know, go to college probably," I said with an awkward laugh.

"You gonna follow Spencer to Texas?"

Spencer tensed up. I couldn't tell if it was from stress or the invasiveness of the question or what his deal was.

"Um... maybe. I'll see when that time comes."

I never had to make up my mind about this issue. We broke up less than three months later. I never had dinner with Spencer's dad again.

I woke up feeling sick and dizzy. I felt like this had happened before. I had to force myself to stand up, every inch of my body weak and scaly from dehydration. I chugged down handfuls of water from the sink while I struggled not to vomit it back up. It was a mistake to drink so fast. I felt my hair floating in the putrid toilet water. The room danced around me as I tried to stand. Unable to bear it anymore, I shuffled back to the bed and collapsed on top of the comforter. I'd never felt so dizzy in my life. And cold.

AFTERMATH

Ashley

When I woke up, I was so confused and disoriented. Dizzy. Sunlight burned my eyes. I didn't know where I was. All I knew was I was in a bed and I was sick. So, so sick. I tried to run to the bathroom, but my legs were wobbly. The world swayed and spun around me. I collapsed back onto the bed as soon as I got up. When I woke up, I was kneeling before the toilet, vomiting. Water splashed up and hit me in the nose and cheeks and eyes. My teeth felt so grimy. I didn't even remember making it in the bathroom. If I looked half as bad as I felt, I wouldn't be surprised.

The tile floor was so blissfully cold. So inviting. After I finished puking my guts out, I couldn't stop myself from lying down and pressing my face against it. It was the underside of the pillow that had yet to touch your face. Anyone who has ever had the stomach flu and was spending hours of the night in the bathroom just waiting to throw up again knows the allure of a cold bathroom floor.

As I was sprawled out on the ground, my world seemed to make more sense to me. I was in someone's bathroom in a house that wasn't my own. I reasoned it was Spencer's house after remembering the party the night before. I couldn't remember most of the details. I must have been really fucked up. I knew I drank a lot, but that wasn't even the most drunk I had ever been before. Not enough to blackout. At least I didn't think it was...

That was when I got cold. Freezing. I thought I was in a blizzard, my body was so cold.

And then I realized I was almost completely naked. All I had on was my underwear. I sat up so fast I nearly passed out. I crawled back into the bedroom and frantically searched for my clothes. The world was a dizzy blur. When I finally found my clothes, I realized I needed to vomit again and scurried back into the bathroom like a sewer rat. I prayed my clothes wouldn't get hit with any backsplash.

With my dress in a ball beside me and more toilet water splashed on my face, I willed myself to stand and wash myself off in the sink. I drank down handful after handful to cure the burning pain in my throat. I knew it was all coming back up soon, but the relief was indescribable. Just feeling clean water touch my lips was so soothing.

I struggled for a solid ten minutes to get dressed, the grogginess and nausea turning me into a slug. When I finally did get the dress back on, my stomach was turning just enough to stay glued to the toilet but not enough to actually puke.

When I groaned with pure agony, I heard someone call out from the hallway. "Ashley? Is that you? Are you okay?"

I didn't want to worry Megan. She shouldn't see me like this. I didn't have the strength to get dressed. "I'm fine!"

Megan entered the bathroom and saw me half-naked and hunched over the toilet. She quickly averted her eyes. "Oh. Uh... I heard you yell. Are you alright? Do you want water?"

"Thanks, sweetie, but I'll be fine," I assured her. "I just gotta get home."

"You really shouldn't drive..."

I smiled and waved her concerns off. “I’ll be okay. Trust me. Don’t drink until you’re in college, you hear me?” I held my stomach tight as another wave of queasiness hit me. “Actually, don’t even drink at all. Like, *never* at all. Understand?”

She didn’t find my comment amusing. “Do you want me to get Spencer?”

Memory of the fight hit me like a ton of bricks. “No!” I composed myself, not wanting to upset her. “No, don’t make him worry about this. I just drank too much. Swear.”

With every ounce of strength in my body, I forced myself to put the rest of my clothes back on. After stumbling to my feet and exiting the bathroom, I reached out and hugged her. In truth, I was just trying to steady myself and she was the perfect resting point.

“Stay awesome, Meg.”

The Belle of the Ball then began her walk of shame through her ex-boyfriend’s house.

The journey down the stairs was agonizing. I couldn’t even open my eyes as more sunlight creeped in from the large crescent-shaped windows overlooking the foyer. My brain felt weightless and foggy. My legs were like jello. But I knew Meg was watching so I forced myself to march like a soldier in formation. I wouldn’t let her see me like this. I was a trooper and I could rest on my own time. Wasn’t the first time I left a party looking like a drunken slob and it certainly wouldn’t be the last. This came with the territory. Every step might have been pure pain, but I could bear it. I was stronger than any of them realized.

Upon opening the front door, the Sun was like a spotlight shining directly in my eyes. My Mom took me to work the day they had an interview with the local news channel and the lights they used for the video were the brightest I’d ever seen. Until now, anyways. I nearly passed out from the rush of grueling torment on my brain, but I stayed tall. Making sure I was careful doing down the porch and onto the walkway, I knew I could do this. Just getting to my car was the rough part. Nobody could see me like this. Nobody could know.

Why couldn’t I remember anything from the night before? How did I get onto the bed? Why was I naked? Did someone try to hurt me? I thought I could remember a face, but it was a shadow. Everything came flooding back, but it was all a haze. I didn’t know what was happening. It was all too much. I heard a voice cry out from behind me, but I couldn’t understand the words.

And then I fell.

Beth

It was almost noon and Lauren still had yet to call me. Strange.

I was laying on my bed, staring at a particular spot on the ceiling I focused on when I needed to pass some time and think. It was a small little dot of no significance. I randomly spotted it a few years back and have been unable to not see it since then. Whenever I roll over with my eyes open, there it was. Staring back at me.

I gave my phone a glance. Nothing.

I had not stopped thinking about the party since it happened. I would have stopped him if it came to it, or at least died in the attempt. But then reality hit me like a truck. When reason took over my primal urge to act rather than think, I used all the factors in play to make a decision: he is three times my overall size, he could have been armed, and putting Ashley into a traumatizing position suits my needs better than having her strutting around like the haughty bitch she is. Those pictures are more valuable than anything. If things got physical, there is no telling how things could have gone.

I checked my phone again. Nothing.

I should have jumped in to help Lauren, though. That was my mistake. I heard her get hurt but when I heard him run off, I knew she would be okay. I was prepared to do something to protect her. If he had tried anything besides a defensive shove, I would have shoved that candlestick down his fucking throat. I regret my inaction in that moment more than most of my decisions in life up to that point.

My phone lit up and I scrambled to check what it was. Nothing but a Twitter notification.

If he had tried to do anything more than push her out of the way to escape, I would slit his throat and toss him in a ditch. It is more than he deserves anyway. Brad Kendrick is pure scum. Anyone who was so desperate for physical intimacy that they would resort to drugging and raping someone is nothing but human trash. A waste of precious nonrenewable resources.

I thought the dot moved for a second. It did not.

I stayed awake all night and weighed my options. My eyes physically hurt due to lack of sleep. I could go to the police and have him thrown behind bars, but was there even enough to convict him? A teenage boy was standing over a half-naked teenage girl. I had a picture of him taking off her clothes, but I take off Lauren's clothes all the time. Can that send *me* to prison as well? I mean, this *is* Texas so maybe, but this is different. He never actually assaulted her, never penetrated her. She could get tested for whatever drugs he gave her and maybe it would show up on a toxicology report, but there is no proof he gave them to her. Plus that might not be such a good idea since we don't know what other substances might show up on that report...

There was... what? A thousand other people floating in and out of Spencer's property that night? I do not know how to test if someone was roofied so I was not even sure you can test for that in anything other than a post-mortem toxicology report. It was something to add to my list of research topics.

And the more I thought it over, the more I knew how beneficial these pictures could be. I would never expose Ashley as the class skank with them, though. Anyone who sees them would instantly know she was the victim in this situation. How could you not? This poor beautiful Homecoming Queen was about to be raped by the big bad linebacker. Ashley Williams had a free pass here. If and when I needed to use these, it would be to take Brad down and build Ashley up simultaneously. When this would be, I was not sure. Brad isn't close enough to Spencer's administration to make a major dent and there was always another football player or cheerleader to take his place. I would sleep on it.

I had not been sleeping well for the past two years since I moved to Texas. I could tell the lack of genuine rest was hindering my mental capabilities. I make dumb mistake and after dumb mistake because of pure jealousy and greed. My ego needed to be checked like baggage at a TSA checkpoint. This was another matter that I would need to sleep on. Eventually.

Checking my phone again proved pointless. It had only been three minutes since I woke up from my power nap and started checking it for updates again.

Now the big decision needs to be made: will I be the clingy girlfriend who doesn't respect personal space or do I let her wake up from her potentially skull-cracking hangover? Given that it was nearly noon on a Saturday, I decided she had slept enough and needed some fresh air, greasy hash browns, and some good old happy thoughts to feel better. I dialed the number and put on the sweetest, most loving tone I could muster with just a hint of sarcasm to remind her that she made a dumb choice getting as drunk as she did the night before.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty! Hope you slept well! If I come over there and you haven't had at least three glasses of water, I'm sticking the IV in you myself. Eat small bites of something easy to digest and don't drink anything else... wait, who am I kidding, you know all this already. Haha. Anyway, call me back when you can. Love you."

I inhaled deeply and exhaled. Never been a fan of phone calls. Give me anxiety.

With so many new possibilities and outcomes to consider, I gave up on the prospect of speaking to Lauren anytime soon. My stomach rumbled for the first time since before I had dinner. I realized it had been over seventeen hours since I last actually ate. With nothing better to do except stare at the dot on the ceiling, I got up to get myself some breakfast. Or lunch, I guess.

Spencer

They say time flies when you're having fun. Despite the party arguably being a disaster in terms of the breakup and the gossip and the issues with Frank and Brad and the girls, there were some highlights to the night. It seemed like morning broke before I could really enjoy my own party.

The cleanup was not the fun part and time was crawling through the mud as I tried to clean the mess from the night before. It really astounded me how much trash one party could produce. The Leaning Tower of Pizza Boxes and the Beer Can Pyramid would have made fine tourist attractions if I wanted to make some extra cash. I'm shocked the beer bottle bowling alley in the dining room didn't end in the floor being covered in broken glass.

Black contractor bag after black contractor bag was filled with the remains of the previous night. I needed to find a way to hide them from my dad. Garbage day wasn't until Friday and he was due back on Monday. I figured I could just stash it in the garage, but he might decide to work on his car while I'm at school. I could force Frank to take it all as repayment for pissing me off. I still had a couple days to decide.

I had to crawl under an end table to reach for some rogue beer cans. I nearly shit my pants when I heard someone knocking on the wall across the room. What hurt the most was when I bashed my head off of the bottom of the table, nearly toppling it over.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to scare you!" Thankfully not my dad's voice. He'd actually kill me if it was him. It was a girl. Not Megan, though.

"No, no, it's okay," I assured the stranger. "It happens. I've had worse." I crawled out like an infant and my eyes darted up to see who was there.

Lauren looked so incredibly guilty as she stood over me. "Are you alright?" she asked, unsure of whether to approach me and help me up or stay where she was.

"Uh... yeah. Yeah, no, I'm good. I'll live." I held up the beer can and tossed it in the garbage bag. "People need to learn how to clean up after themselves. This is ridiculous."

"Want some help?"

I couldn't refuse someone offering to help me clean the entire house. "I couldn't ask—"

"I'll grab another bag," she said, smiling at my modesty.

I felt like a regular Tom Sawyer getting someone to do my dirty work for me even though she was the one who offered to help me out in the first place. Either way, I had a partner. "See this?" I held up the bag I had resting at the edge of the table. "This was just *one* of the bags from the kitchen. We still got the whole house to go."

"Maybe I'll just get the whole box." She chuckled and walked into the kitchen.

We spent the next hour trying to clean the house. The mess was somewhere between that of an aspiring hoarder and the aftermath of a riot. I'm no expert on hoarding or riots, but that seems like a fair comparison. With every can I threw away and every pizza box I broke down to fit inside the trash bag, I grew more annoyed that *nobody* could handle the simple task of maintaining a clean and happy home while they got shitfaced and listened to loud music with their buddies.

Lauren was very helpful. She actually made an effort to help instead of fucking off before the sun came up. We used to hang out together back in middle school when a bunch of us would go out in groups to the mall or movies or whatever. She was always cool but we were never *close* close. We kinda lost touch in high school even though we both ended up popular and athletes. Ashley brought her around for group stuff with the girls and the guys, but she was more interested in them than reconnecting with me. It was nice to spend time with her again.

"I promise I used the trash cans whenever I had something to throw away," she swore as she looked at the mountain of full contractor bags we had made in the kitchen that was only getting bigger.

"Mhmm. So did they."

I couldn't bring myself to tear down the Leaning Tower of Pizza Boxes. It really was a work of art. Lauren took care of that for me by grabbing one of the boxes jutting out further than the others and gave it a hard yank. The entire structure came troubling down. I almost cried at the world's shortest game of Jenga coming to a close.

"At least they have a future in architecture."

We shared an exhausted and frustrated laugh. She had a cute laugh.

After another twenty minutes of cleaning and the ruins of the Tower relegated to the trash, we collapsed on the couch. My head was killing me from the night before and spending two hours cleaning the entire house was not my idea of a hangover cure. I needed water. Bad.

"So what *are* you still doing here?" I asked. "Why'd you decide to help me play maid when you could have gone home?"

"You're welcome for that, by the way," she threw back at me.

"From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I'd drop to my knees, but my head is killing me."

She giggled. "It's fine. Tell you the truth, I passed out on the couch in your dad's office. I'm shocked I haven't puked yet. But I don't mind helping with cleanup. I mean, I helped trash your house, too."

"Did you enjoy the party at least?"

"Yeah. Yeah it was fun."

She hesitated a little bit there. Did she not like it? I didn't really see her do much besides hang out with Beth and dance a little. Was she upset about the whole situation with Ashley, too?

"Was somebody sleeping in the guest room?" I asked. "You could have crashed in there instead of on my dad's couch. Just a little bit more comfortable."

"Well, I did go in there, but... look, that's what I gotta talk to about—"

Footsteps echoed through the hallway and I heard someone calling my name. Megan ran into the living room, panicked. The front door was wide open behind her, the sunlight burning my eyes.

"Spencer, come quick! It's Ashley!"

We stood over Ashley, who was passed out on my lawn. She looked terrible. There's no other way to say it. She looked like even though she probably slept through the night, she didn't

get a wink of meaningful sleep. Was she out on the lawn all night? How did none of my neighbors bother to call the cops? I'd rather get busted for having a party than have her die outside my house.

"Is she going to be okay?" Megan asked, her whole body shaking.

"She'll be fine. I promise." I'd seen her get really drunk at parties before, especially the last few we've held. This was nothing new. "She's probably just really hungover."

"No," Megan said, shaking her head. "No, she's not just hungover. Something is really, *really* wrong."

I gave her a little hug, trying to calm her down. I could feel her begin to sob into my side. "She's gonna be okay," I swore. "I promise."

"I almost let her drive home," she quietly admitted into my shirt. "She could have died."

"It's not your fault, Meg," I said as lovingly as possible. It really wasn't. "You did the right thing getting me the second she passed out. It's gonna be okay."

Realizing that the neighbors probably wouldn't appreciate seeing a teenage girl passed out on my lawn in broad daylight, I did my best to lift her up and drag her back to the house. Lauren and Meg tried their best to help me. Ashley was like a sack of flour. She just refused to be lifted. She smelled like vomit and regrets.

By the time we got her back inside, I decided that she could sleep it off on the couch. We were never going to get her back upstairs without her support and I was terrified of her falling down the steps. I tucked her in and gave her the softest pillow in the house so she could at least try to get some rest. I felt bad. I felt like I drove her to this point.

"I'm gonna finish cleaning with Lauren," I told Meg. "Promise you'll keep an eye on her?"

She nodded and sat down on the recliner across from her. She didn't take her eyes off of her the whole morning while she slept. She really did think of Ashley as her older sister. I hoped she wouldn't take our breakup too bad.

Lauren went back outside while I took care of Ashley. I found her sitting on the porch out front. I sat down beside her.

"How is she?" she asked.

"Sleeping. I think she started drooling before I left."

"Be serious. Please?"

"She drank way too much last night. I watched her chugging down anything she could get her hands on. She just needs to sleep it off."

"She's never been a good sleeper," Lauren said as she looked off at the street. "She always complained about that. No matter what she tried, never slept well."

I can only guess they spent a lot of nights together and she was speaking from first-hand knowledge. She was a very restless sleeper. She would probably never admit it and I would not try to pry into their personal lives, especially not now, but I could tell she had some personal experience on this matter.

“She tends to wake up screaming from nightmares.” I shuddered. Terrifying as it was to have a girl freaking out in bed beside you, it was always nice to hold her after she woke up and try to lull her back to sleep. I was going to miss that.

Lauren smiled. “Yeah.”

We spent a moment together and watched the sunrise. It was so peaceful. The sunlight made her practically glow. The blonde highlights really suited her. I felt so horrible she was in such bad shape. I didn’t want to get back up and face reality again. Eventually, though, Lauren stood and held out a soft hand to help me to my feet.

“We should probably go finish cleaning while she sleeps.”

We spent another hour putting the house back together again. When we were finished, we had twelve contractor bags full of garbage ready to be dumped off on Frank’s house. Not feeling like leaving the house anytime soon and needing to make sure Ashley was okay, I decided to wait until the next morning to hand it off. It would give him time to think up an apology. Lauren eventually went home, after some poking and prodding by myself, and it was up to me and Megan to keep an eye on Ashley. She slept soundly while we watched TV with the volume down low. I wondered what she was dreaming about.

“So how’d you like your first high school party?”

Megan turned and stared at me. “I’m never going to one of these again.”

Beth

When I heard the doorbell ring, I had a pretty easy time guessing who it was. We didn't get solicitors often and it was far too late in the day for someone to be trying to sell me a new phone plan if it was one. Plus I did not exactly have friends who visited unannounced.

I felt a small twang of anxiety over my numerous phone calls and texts. I wondered if she ever got irritated with the bombardment of notifications. I tried to keep them spaced out enough so that she would not get *too* annoyed. If it really was an issue, though, she could have just answered and said so. Not the worst way to spend twenty seconds of your life. Maybe she was worried about coming off an asshole by telling me to back off over the phone? Just grow a pair and tell me to leave you alone. I can take it.

I took a deep breath before reaching for the doorknob. The bell rang again, the loud *DING* echoed in my ears. I frowned. Why was she being so impatient? She hit the button less than two minutes ago.

The door opened and Lauren was waiting on the other side. Her face was puffy and her eyes red. I wanted to embrace her and take all her pains away.

"Where have you been?" I demanded in my best overbearing motherly tone. "I tried calling you, like, seven times." I stopped to look at her more closely, pretending to only just notice she was upset. "What's wrong? Did something happen?" Rhetorical question. Obviously. I knew exactly what happened. She began to cry again. I dropped the control freak voice and went into full-blown supportive girlfriend mode. "What can I do?"

"Can we go somewhere and talk?" she finally managed to squeeze out between her sobs. "I really need someone right now."

I nodded and held her close.

We ended up going to the park a half-hour away from her house.

There were two main parks we like to hang out at: Lake Arlington and Joe Pool Lake. My personal favorite was at Bowman Springs Park on Lake Arlington, despite it being smaller and having less space. We had a little spot in Bowman Springs underneath the trees. It has a little gazebo and boat launch. If we wanted a more secluded area, we'd go to one of the various parks around Joe Pool Lake and make out in the bushes. Lake Arlington was more intimate. It was the location of one of our first dates. It rained halfway through. We had our first kiss in her father's spare car while we waited for the storm to pass. It never did. I was very glad for that.

It was the middle of the night. The city killed off most of the night sky, but there were some stars. We stared into the darkness in silence for over an hour. We had not spoken a word to each other since she said she needed someone to talk to back at my place. The whole car ride was pure silence. I knew she needed time to process everything. I had no intention of pushing it. She had to be ready to open up to me. That was key.

Another hour or so went by before I grew a little bored. Much as I respected her privacy, I figured she had enough time to think so I made the first move. "It's beautiful out tonight."

"Yeah."

"Do you wanna talk about it?"

“I don’t know.”

“Laur, you asked me to leave my house at seven at night and drove me to a field to watch the stars. Unless you’re going to propose to me or kill me, I feel like you want to talk about something.”

She chuckled. It was a very remorseful laugh. I could hear her fears in every exhale. “I can’t afford a ring right now.”

“Ring Pops work, too.”

“You do love your Ring Pops.” We smiled and laughed and for a moment, everything was okay. Nothing else mattered. “Something happened at the party,” she finally opened up.

For the next half hour, she talked nonstop about what happened with Ashley and how she feels like it was her fault and that she shouldn’t have taken so long to get up the stairs and how she shouldn’t have run off afterward without telling someone even though she knew she was really drunk and scared and she was the only witness and nobody would take her word over Brad’s. It was a mountain of word vomit and if I did not know the whole story already, I probably would have needed her to stop and retell everything much, much slower.

Even though Lauren was popular and wealthy and really hot and smart, she wasn’t Brad Kendrick. His father was the co-owner of a major construction firm and his mother worked for the Mayor. They held *a lot* of political sway in this city. If anyone went after their beloved son, a boy who was destined for a major college with a major football program and eventually a potential career on a major professional football team, they’d call on the Devil to cast that shitstirring bastard who dared speak out against their family into fires of Hell to burn for eternity.

Ashley never stood a chance. Lauren never stood a chance. And Brad knew this.

Lauren began to weep. I did what any good girlfriend would do and held her as close as possible. I let her cry into my shoulders. She still kinda smelled like booze. I figured she didn’t have the energy to shower after what she went through.

It took everything in me not to laugh hysterically after she told me the whole story. Hearing everything I missed from behind that bathroom door filled me with pure joy. Oh sure, I felt bad about her getting hip checked into the door, but knowing that someone got to experience it firsthand and got to see Ashley at her lowest, her absolute worst, was just amazing. Real icing on the cake stuff. After all the shit she helped cause the year prior, she deserved it. It was time for Ashley Williams to finally face some consequences for being the most evil little cunt I’ve ever had the misfortune of knowing.

“I wish there was something we could do for her,” she cried.

“We’ll do whatever we can,” I promised. “Anything for her.”

Oh, Lauren, I’m so sorry for everything I’ve ever said to her to make her upset. I swear I’ll be kinder to her going forward. We may have our differences, but if it makes you happy then I will do it. Whatever helps. Anything for you, my darling.

I smiled as I held her tight.

“Anything at all.”

Ashley

I hadn't slept so well in ages. I couldn't remember when I passed out last night, but it felt so good to just sleep in on a Saturday morning and wake up bright and early feeling refreshed and ready to enjoy the weekend.

That is how I would have reacted if I would have been able to sleep until my body was naturally ready to wake up.

Instead, I was treated to an alarm clock consisting of the lights on my fan turning on and an overeager girlfriend blowing a noisemaker directly in my face. Much as I loved her, I wanted to shove it down her throat for ruining my sleep. I almost jumped out of bed and attacked her because I thought it was an intruder. If I wasn't wrapped up in my blankets like a mummy and my half-awake brain wasn't desperately trying to comprehend what was going on, she'd have gotten a black eye.

"Morning, sleepyhead!"

I buried my face under the pillows, trying to keep the light out of my eyes. My efforts were worthless. She took the pillow and ripped it out of my grasp.

"Ashy-Poo! Come on, wake up!"

I groaned. The blankets offering me the most ineffective shield against the world were ripped off of my body. I curled up into a shivering ball as the cool air stung my skin. I wanted to scream. Anyone else trying this and I would have. "Stop! It's freezing!"

"It's like seventy degrees in here," she protested. "Don't be a baby."

I turned onto my stomach and buried my face into the mattress. It was the last hope I had of delaying this moment while my brain began to wake up and take in what was really going on. For some reason, I swore I smelled chocolate cake. "You're an asshole," I murmured, my voice muffled from the sheets beneath me.

"Huh?" I felt her kneel down on the bed beside me as she leaned in to listen closer. "I didn't quite catch that. Maybe speak a little louder."

She knew exactly how to push my buttons. I hate repeating myself. I sat up and turned my head just enough to yell back at her. "I said you're an—"

My eyes were still adjusting to the light and my vision was full of those little patchy blurry spots. I almost smacked my head off the headboard when she blew the noisemaker directly into my face. The little frayed tips tickled my nose. I didn't have a chance of avoiding that loud little piece of plastic from smacking me in the face. And she had the *gall* to laugh in my face while I flopped around on the bed in terror? The nerve of this bitch.

"Why are you being such an ass today?!"

"I had to wake you up somehow, dummy," she declared.

"What are you even doing here? It's only..." I tried to see my alarm clock, but my vision was still blurry.

She saved me the trouble. "Seven in the morning. I stayed up all night making that."

When my eyes finally adjusted to the light, I saw what was on my little nightstand. Beside the lamp and the alarm clock was a German chocolate cake with sixteen little candles in it. Why did the sight of a cake make me feel sad? I love German chocolate.

“Did my Mom or Dad see you come in?”

“Nope! I waited down the street until they left for work. Thanks for telling me about the spare key in the flower pot, by the way. I’d have had to call you to open the door and I know you weren’t waking up without me here to help.”

She looked all smug recounting her adventures into the world of breaking and entering. I couldn’t help but shake my head and laugh. “Wow. Stalker much?” She blew the noisemaker in my face again. This time I was ready for it and tried to bite it. I just barely missed. “You know you could have gotten here later and we still could have spent the entire rest of the day together, right?” We had planned for spending some time together for weeks now. The day was finally here and it felt amazing to be living it again.

“True... but I couldn’t wait to do this.”

She leaned in and kissed me, catching me totally off guard. How could I say no when she was already holding my hands and rubbing my fingers with her thumbs? Naturally, I returned the kiss and we kissed with all the passion a half-awake teen could muster. When I finally pulled up for air, I just held her face close to mine and looked deep into her eyes. She has the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen.

“Also I drank, like, five cups of coffee last night so I’m kinda sorta totally blitzed out of my skull right now and couldn’t make myself sit still until noon.”

I licked my lips. “I can tell,” I teased. She tasted like cappuccino. Ever since her dad got the cappuccino machine for Christmas from one of his work buddies, she’d all but taken it for herself. I’m not a coffee drinker so I’d let her do the drinking for us when we go out to “study” at coffee shops. I just order brownies.

“So get dressed,” she ordered. “We can eat cake for breakfast and after that, we can do whatever you want. It’s your birthday and you only get one of them every year.”

She got up and danced around the room a little. I couldn’t help but stare. Everything was just so right in that moment, but there was this... voice. It kept telling me that this was all going to end. Part of me knew the voice was right. This was fleeting. A dream. I made sure to memorize every little finite detail. I’d die if I forgot it for a second.

Lauren froze in place and stared at me. She smiled so warmly. “I love you, Ashley.”

I stared at the ceiling for what seemed like hours. I vaguely remembered waking up before. I can’t believe I wanted to drive. I felt terrible. Worse than any hangover I’d ever had in my life, if that was even possible. Every square inch of my body felt weak. It was like I had the flu, but I knew I wasn’t sick. I just wanted to run into the bathroom and puke and feel that momentary sense of relief you get after vomiting before it slowly builds up again, like when you have the stomach flu. But I knew I was tapped out. I already puked my guts out hours ago, the memory of nearly falling against the sink flooding back to me. Now I was trapped on the couch with nothing but the blanket wrapped around me to protect me from the real world.

I wished the dream could never end. That was one of the best days of my life. No, it was the *best* day of my entire life. We spent the whole day together. She made me feel like an honest to god princess. I wouldn't have traded that day for all the money in the world. Now I can't even eat German chocolate cake without getting sick. How did I manage to fuck things up so badly?

You know why. Don't pretend you're anything but a junkie whore.

Despite the throbbing headache that nearly brought me to tears, I forced myself to sit up. The room was spinning. I needed water. There was no way I would be able to walk to the kitchen to get it, though.

I thought I was saved when I saw Spencer passed out on the recliner beside me. I wanted nothing more than to wake him up and ask him for help. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to get me anything I wanted. I figured he was the one who tucked me in. What was one more little favor?

But I couldn't bring myself to wake him up. I just wanted to be alone.

I shuffled quietly into the kitchen to find food and water. I was like some weird survivalist living off the land who had just gone days without something to eat. I placed a glass up to the water dispenser built into the fridge and filled it to the brim. I chugged the glass down, ignoring the stream of water pouring down my cheek and dripping onto the floor. I refilled the glass as fast as possible. I needed more. After three glasses, I felt sick again. It was worth it. I grabbed an apple out of the fruit bowl that had somehow survived the party and took a couple pieces of bread from the cabinet. A real breakfast of champions.

My keys were resting on the table beside the front door, somehow surviving the hundreds of people that came and went throughout the night. I took them and reached for the front door. Even though I knew he was still fast asleep, I turned and took one last look at Spencer. Part of me hoped he would wake up and stop me.

But at this point, I just didn't care anymore.

I shut the door behind me as quietly as possible, giving my eyes a chance to adjust to the blinding sun. I wondered how long it would take before someone even noticed I was gone.

Spencer

It'd been two days since Ashley ran off. I never even heard her get up.

After the meetings with O'Reilly were over, Student Council met up to discuss what was going on. Only the important people were interviewed so a lot of people weren't up to speed and ran entirely on hearsay. Being the acting President, it was up to me to address the crowd and help them get through this. Everyone was worried sick. I wished Ashley was here to help. She was always better at handling these meetings than I was.

"I'm going to assume word got around by now," I began after asking everyone to be quiet for a moment, "but in case you didn't hear, Ashley ran away sometime over the weekend. They haven't told me anything and all I know is it happened sometime between late Saturday night and Sunday morning because by the time me and my sister woke up, she was gone."

"I really hope she's okay," Frank said. "I told O'Reilly everything I could, but I really don't know anything."

"She couldn't have gotten far," Tracy offered.

"So they have no idea where she went?" Brad asked.

"No." It was so hard to admit we were totally blind. I drove over to her place as soon as I woke up and found out she was gone, but nobody answered the door. "That's why I called all of you here. I know a lot of you were at the party and saw her throughout the night. If anyone has anything they can share or know anything that happened during that party I didn't hear about, please God let me know. *Especially* stuff you didn't want to tell O'Reilly."

As I expected, nobody spoke up. I had nothing else to add. My stomach was in knots.

"Do we still wanna do anything student council-related?" Frank hesitantly asked.

"We should be out there looking for her," I said with as much fire as I could muster. "Who cares about this bullshit? She is what matters right now."

"What can we do, though?" Tom asked. "If the police can't find her, what can we do?"

Lauren stepped into the room carrying a stack of papers. I saw her standing in the doorway since we started. She put the stack down on the closest table and began handing them out. "We can put these up. Get people around her neighborhood looking. It's *something*."

I stepped forward and took a stack. "I'll get them up all around town by this evening." I took a closer look at her face now that I was standing beside her. She looked like she hadn't slept in days. It reminded me of the few times I saw Beth up close. She was also someone who seemed to be in a constant state of exhaustion. Now Lauren was the one who looked beaten down. I really hoped she was okay. Given her and Ash's history, though, I seriously doubted it.

After the impromptu meeting was over, everyone hurried out to either help find Ashley or just go home and go about their day. I had to get through football practice that afternoon, but I was going to spend all night looking for her if that's what it took. I tried calling her as soon as I left the student council office. It went straight to voicemail. Just like the last fifty tries.

"Do you think she's safe?" I looked up. Lauren was looking at me with these sad puppy dog eyes. I just hope she knew that Ashley loved her. If she was really gone, Lauren would take it worse than anyone in the world.

I tried to smile at her and said, "Come on. Who would mess with Ashley?"

She weakly smiled at me before hugging me. Tight. She smelled like vanilla. "Please find her," she whispered into my chest.

"I will. I promise."

"Do you have any posters left?"

We both jumped when we heard the stranger standing behind me. When we turned around in unison, we found Beth staring at us. She wore a smile, but I could tell she was not happy about seeing her girlfriend hugging a random guy. Knowing what I know about these two was one of the strangest things. It's like a secret I was never meant to know and they knew I knew it and it only makes things even more awkward.

"Um... yeah. Yeah back at my locker," Lauren said a little too quickly.

"Great! Let's go!" Beth reached for Lauren's hand and pulled her away. Lauren gave me a quick wave and mouthed a "Thank you" before they turned the corner and were out of sight.

Much as I wanted to keep talking to Lauren about everything going on, I had to get to practice. It was so hard to force myself into that locker room to get changed. I didn't have the energy for it. I just sat there and stared at the floor. One of the Freshmen had to come and find me. I said I ate too much for lunch. I knew I was going to suck because there was no way I'd be able to focus on anything else. But since I'm just her ex-boyfriend. The coaches wouldn't care.

The team comes first. It always comes first.

Practice was, to say the least, torture. Coach Mullens was pissed I skipped lifting beforehand and made me run hills until my legs felt like they were going to give out. After it was finally over, he cussed me out and "reminded me" about who I am and what I should be doing for the team.

God forbid I put myself first for once in my life.

Tired as I was and hopeless as everything seemed, I wasn't giving up so easily. I drove straight to Ashley's house to search for any clues as to where she might be. I knew the police had probably turned the house apart searching for clues, but maybe they missed something?

When I reached the house, I didn't see anyone in the driveway. I had no idea when Ashley's Mom would be home so I would have to take matters into my own hands. It wasn't the first time I had broken into the house. I'd made a science out of silently placing the ladder against the side of the house. Even though she wasn't there to open it for me today, I wasn't worried about being locked out. The window didn't have a lock.

Overcoming my fear of heights for the hundredth time, I carefully opened the window and wiggled my way inside. My biggest fear was getting back out.

It was weird being in Ashley's room without her being there. I hated being in other people's houses. It was a weird anxiety I've had since I was little. I just can't get comfortable in someone else's house or in hotels. I shook off the fear and got to work. I checked everywhere I could think of. In the closet, between the mattresses, under the pillow, in her drawers. God, I felt like such a creep tearing through her underwear drawer just hoping I'd find something that would tell me where she was. I couldn't close it faster enough.

When I checked her nightstand drawer, I found a bunch of random crap inside. A small screwdriver, some loose change, a key, old video game instruction manuals, and what I believed to be a small vibrator. I shuddered and closed it fast. You'd think I would be comfortable around something like that considering how often we did it by that point, but you'd be very wrong.

I really thought this was a total waste until I checked her desk drawer. I checked through the first couple drawers, nothing. But things changed when I saw the sliding drawer underneath the center of the desk. (I don't know what they're called. We stick pencils and notepads in them at my house. I'm playing detective, not wordsmith.) I tried it, but it was locked. Being the super sleuth I was, I remembered seeing a single key in her nightstand drawer. I retrieved it and tried the lock.

It clicked open.

If the police did search the room, they did a shit job. The drawer was almost empty, but I wasn't ready for what was inside. The stamp bags made my heart sink. I had heard the rumors about her like everyone, but actually seeing it, actually holding it in my hand? I knew she must be in some serious shit. There were five bags of them. I wondered how much she spent on all of this. I wish she'd come to me for help.

Putting the little plastic baggie back in the drawer, I picked up the only other thing inside: a single folded up piece of notebook paper with her name written on it.

To whoever finds this note,

I know this will make you uncomfortable and may cause you mental harm. I'm sorry. I am so sorry. It was never my intention to ruin someone else's life. I never wanted to hurt anyone, but the hurt I feel on a constant basis is too much to handle. Every moment of my life is agony. I wake up each morning feeling weak and sick and tired and I go to bed wanting to cry because I know I will need to do it all over again. It's an unending cycle of abuse and self-hatred and there is nothing I can do about it.

My final request is for this letter to be shown to the following people so they can know how much I really loved them: My mother, my friends Casey and Heather, my old friend Michelle, my boyfriend Spencer, and Lauren.

Tell my Mother I can't begin to describe how sorry I am for doing this to you. This isn't your fault. I know I was a massive disappointment. I don't deserve you as a Mom. I'm sorry for any pain I caused you and I'm sorry I wasted years of your life. I'm so, so sorry.

Tell my friends Casey and Heather I valued their friendship so much. They were the closest things to friends I've had in years. Even if we were growing apart over the past few months because of my own problems, I'll always consider you some of my closest friends. Thank you.

Tell Michelle that I am so sorry we drifted apart. You were my closest friend for so long. I'm sorry I threw that away. You deserved to know the truth. I was too much of a coward to be honest with you. We should have been roommates and been bridesmaids and been best friends forever just like we planned back in grade school. I'm sorry. I only had myself to blame.

Tell Spencer I'm sorry our relationship fell apart. We were never meant to be. It was all my fault. I'm sorry for the fight at the party. You didn't deserve that. You're a good guy. You were the first guy I've ever been with. Part of me will always love you even if I can't bring myself to actually love you. That's my fault. Not yours. I just can't love you the way you deserve. I know you'll find someone who can and will

love you in a way I physically can't. You deserve that girl more than anything in the world. And say goodbye to Megan for me.

Tell Lauren I never stopped loving her and hope she forgets me soon so she doesn't feel like she caused this. I'm not worth remembering. That night was the worst moment of my life. I'll never forgive myself for letting you see me like that. I wanted to be better, but I can't. You're too good for me anyways. Please just move on and live your life. You deserve so much better than someone like me. I love you.

Nothing in the world can make me feel better about myself. I lost everyone I ever truly loved and I cannot let anyone ever love me again. If I do let someone love it, it will only end in heartbreak for everyone involved. My friends only put up with me because a group of people decided I was the popular kid and worth spending time with for clout. It's all bullshit. No one can ever really love me because no one really knows me. The only person in the world who knows who I am wants nothing to do with me anymore. To know me is to hate me. Never again.

I'm sorry. Goodbye.

I set the letter back down on the desk and collapsed back onto the bed. I wanted to cry. I never realized she was hurting so badly. I never realized her drug addiction could actually be worse than people made it out to be at school. It was all too much to take in. I had to get out of that house. Not because I was worried about being caught by her mom. I had to find out what happened to Ashley. I *had* to find her before she was gone forever.

Note in hand, I rushed out of the backdoor and sprinted to my truck. My mind was racing. The thought running on repeat through my mind over and over and over again was she was dead in a ditch somewhere. It was the worst scenario I could think of. Could she really kill herself?

But the detective in me had so many questions. I forced myself to relax just enough to think clearly.

Where would she have gone to kill herself? Did she have a copy of the note with her? Did she even *make* multiple copies of the note? Why would she keep the note in her locked desk drawer? How would anyone know to look there for a suicide note? The police couldn't find it. Who was it even addressed to? Everything was an instruction for someone else to tell people how she felt. Was she just hoping a random person would find it and carry out her instructions? It was some Thirteen Reasons Why-grade shit and I know for a fact that she hated that book and really hated that show.

The more I thought it over, the less sense it made. This put my mind at ease in the slightest amount possible that maybe it was just a rough draft and she didn't mean for it to be seen by anyone. Not yet, anyway.

I drove back to my house, but I couldn't leave my truck. I wanted to keep looking. I knew I had to. I just didn't know where to begin. So I started reading the note. Over and over again. It was only a single page, front and back, but I couldn't help but wonder if I was missing something. She didn't reach out to any of her friends so she didn't go to them for help. The note had to have been written either on Saturday after she snuck out of my house or on Sunday while she was at home. The part about her coming out and wishing me well could have been written in response to us breaking up. If it was, that means she had only been gone for a day, maybe two. How far could she really have gotten in that short amount of time?

Then I read my section of the note again. I wasn't really mad about the fight looking back on it. At the time, sure, I was pissed, but now it was just a dumb argument over nothing. I still loved her so much and just wanted her to be okay. Even if she didn't love me back in that way, she still cared enough to mention me.

Then I saw the sentence about me being the first guy she'd ever been with. I remembered that night so vividly. We got all dressed up and went to a really nice restaurant. It was like we were going to Prom, but skipped the dance to go straight to the fun part. I didn't think we'd have sex so early into the relationship, but we ended up at her uncle's motel and went to the private room and...

Holy shit. That's it.

I raced over to the motel, nearly blowing three red lights and narrowly avoiding a collision with an SUV that was pulling out of a driveway criminally slowly. I should have lost my license that night. Thankfully no cops were around when they should have been.

It was already getting pretty late when I pulled into the parking lot, finding it fairly empty. Ashley told me that her one uncle owned a chain of motels and kept a private room available for when he was in town. Room 117. She said he once told her Mom that they could go there if anything ever happened at home or if they needed somewhere to spend the night, like if there was a fire or break-in or even if they just needed a fumigator. It wasn't "breaking and entering" since Ashley was allowed to use the room whenever she wanted. Her uncle gave them a spare key, after all.

I prayed I was right about this hunch. I had to be right or she might be gone forever.

I climbed the stairs and stood outside the room at the end of the balcony. Room 117. My breath was trapped in my throat and my arm shook violently as I willed myself to knock on the door. When I did, it felt like time stood still. I heard nothing from the other side despite honing my ears to listen for even the faintest of noises like some kind of bat. I tried to look through the peephole, but I couldn't tell if the room was dark or if there was a shadow being cast over it.

I was about to knock again, but the door unlocked and cracked open. Ashley stood on the other side. Her eyes were bright red and dried tears stained her face. She looked like she had aged ten years in two days. She opened the door so she could step out onto the balcony with me.

I was leaning against the railing when she approached me. The words were caught in my throat and my heart began to beat faster and faster. I wasn't sure what to say to her. What could I possibly say to someone going through so much?

I held out the note. "I found your note."

"Yeah."

I pointed to a single word on the paper. "You misspelled *intention*."

Despite her obvious depression, despite her drug abuse, despite whatever happened to drive her to run away from home for a couple of days, she managed to laugh. The pure ignorance of my statement was enough to make her forget her troubles and laugh for a moment. I couldn't stop myself from laughing with her. We laughed and laughed like fools, forgetting the world around us for a brief moment. It was amazing.

I held out my arms and offered her a hug. Her eyes began to well with tears and she leaned in to accept it. I felt her shudder slightly as she began to cry.

"Let's get you home," I said.

"Okay."

Beth

Despite my pleas to stay home and let the police worry about the matter, Lauren insisted that we go out in search of Ashley. She swung by my house to pick me up and we began the most pointless manhunt in the history of humanity.

I know we will never be able to find her, but if it makes Lauren feel better then who am I to judge her for wanting to take a drive with me at eight-thirty at night? It was not the worst date we had ever been on, but it's not my idea of a good time either.

"I'm just so worried," she said after ten minutes of searching in near-silence. "What if she's hurt or even—"

"Don't think that," I ordered. "Stay positive." She wiped her eyes with a tissue and went back to driving in silence.

The car ride was seemingly never going to end. Lauren insisted we search anywhere that she had visited before or had spoken about going to when she and Lauren were together. I knew I would be doing very little sleeping that night anyway so I would be fine. Lauren, though, needed her rest. I doubt she slept more than a couple of hours since the party.

The circumstances behind her disappearance made no sense to me. I would never be able to talk about this with Lauren for fear of worrying her so I was grateful for my inner monologue existing to serve as someone to bounce ideas and theories off of. Apparently some people do not have a little voice inside their heads that speaks when they read or plan their thoughts ahead of time. I would simply go insane if I could not plan out my thoughts ahead of time from the privacy of my own head. I also believe myself to be the best listener alive so having myself as someone to confide and discuss current events with was a mutually beneficial relationship.

Jesus Christ, I hate this song. When will she finally give up and just go home for the night? Alright, focus. Settle down.

I also have an unnatural level of luck about myself, the likes I have only seen in books and movies where the main protagonist is a complete Mary Sue or Tom Brady in every important moment of his professional football career. But the one thing I know the universe won't give me was Ashley Williams overdosed in a ditch somewhere.

She's probably at a bus station a few towns over, realizing she's out of cash and can't withdraw more for fear of the police finding where... was that Spencer's truck pulling out of a motel parking lot?

It had to have been. It was a brand new cherry red Ford with a white stripe down the middle of the hood. He made sure to show the thing off every chance he got in the school parking lot. I turned back around in my seat to get a better look. My hand clenched into a fist when I made out the occupants of the massive waste of precious gasoline, my nails piercing deep into my palms. Blood began to drip down my fingers and onto the fabric of my jeans.

"Maybe we need to go to Spencer and ask him for his help. I mean, I know he's already done so much, but maybe he might have found something while he was out looking earlier today. He texted me and said he was going to look—"

“We should go check Ashley’s house,” I blurted out. I didn’t care that I cut her off. This was no time for manners. We *needed* to beat them back to the house. “See if her mother is home and talk to her. Maybe they missed something while searching for her. Turn left up here.”

“You think so? I still think we should call Spencer and see if he found anything.”

“I don’t think he’s at his house right now,” I said, impatiently. “Just trust me.”

Being the obedient girlfriend she was, she made the left hand turn and went straight for Ashley’s house. I kept checking the mirrors to see if they were following us. When I realized they were taking a slower route home, I relaxed a little. All we had to do was pull in and wait for Spencer to return to his beloved home so we could confront her at her place.

Lauren nearly cried when she saw Ashley exit Spencer’s truck. I let her run over and speak with her. I could care less what they said. I knew exactly how to spin this to our advantage.

I took Lauren’s phone from the cupholder and unlocked it. Of course I knew her passcode. Scanning through the list of contacts, I found one that I liked and hit the little green call button.

“Hey, Heather! No, sorry, it’s actually Beth calling. I’m out with Lauren and we have major news. We found Ashley... Yeah, I’m totally serious, I’m out with Lauren and we found Ashley coming out of a motel and we’re at her place right now. She looks like she’s okay, thank god. Uh huh... alright, I’ll tell her you’re coming over once they finish talking. Be sure to let Casey know, too, okay? Alright, see you tomorrow. Uh huh. Okay. Buh-bye.”

And just like that, everyone in school would know the truth. *My* truth. The victors write history and I just won.

DIPLOMACY

Katherine

The moment I knew I was never going to win that stupid election was when I saw the crowd of people surrounding Lauren and Beth in the parking lot on Wednesday morning. All my hard work was for nothing, all my campaigning was for nothing, all my hopes and enthusiasm were misplaced and meaningless.

My Mom walked in on me when I was making that stupid banner and was so encouraging. “That looks wonderful, Katie!” She was so proud that her borderline-recluse of a daughter would actually step outside her comfort zone and try to be in the spotlight for a change. “They’re going to love it!”

Part of me was so happy I made my Mother proud of me. Another part of me was embarrassed because I was an angsty teen who didn’t need her mom’s approval. But the rest of me was just happy *someone* acknowledged my hard work.

“I’m not going to win, though,” I dejectedly admitted.

“Oh, please, you have as good a chance as any of those hormonal simpletons,” she said with a wink. “Don’t ever let anyone say you can’t do anything. If they say that, it’s because they’re jealous and know they have no future. But you do. Never let them get to you because you’re better than them. You always have been and always will be. You’re going places, Katie. I love you so so much.”

I wanted to cry. It felt so good to be loved and believed in. She was a great Mom.

But a sign with some flashy colored markers and a generic slogan that looks like it was written by Dr. Seuss with a hangover was meaningless around that school. The real process of winning a popularity contest is being... well... *popular*. Doing things that stand out. Being larger than life despite such a small part of the world. This is never more apparent than in a high school student body election. This is where the jocks are lauded for their efforts on the field or on the court and are granted a recognition that involves doing very little work on their part.

I’m not one of those people. I don’t stand out from the crowd. I’m generic. I’m ensemble. I won’t have the lead in the musical or throw the game winning touchdown pass.

And most importantly, I didn’t save the missing girl.

By Tuesday, everyone knew about what happened with Ashley, Lauren, and Beth. Ashley was caught wandering around town in some kind of depressive episode and Lauren and Beth found her by some motel. They brought her back home safe and sound. The police got involved and gave the “all clear” and went about their business. I have no idea how she didn’t get arrested or whatever for running away. I guess they were either busy or Ash’s Mom begged them to let her off the hook. Casey and Heather showed up after she got home and made sure to let *everyone* know that night. I heard from Instagram when they thanked everyone for looking.

When we got to school on Tuesday morning, all of the people involved had stayed home. They were probably out late due to the visit from the police and were apparently granted an absence because of it. O’Reilly probably didn’t want all the attention.

Spencer, who had practice and was basically required to show up for class, was hounded by everyone for information. Being her ex, he was the only person they could think to approach for details. He admitted he knew nothing except that she was safe. He was just grateful she was home. When I saw him addressing another crowd of people, he looked like he had been up all night. He was probably worried sick about her. I know I would be if it were my ex.

Rumors ran wild all day about what could have possibly happened to her. Some people said she ran away from home because her mom's new boyfriend abused her. Other people said she hooked up with a stranger at the party out of spite and ran away because she got an STD and couldn't face Spencer the next day. One person said he heard her talking at the party about her boyfriend in college that she was going to live with and swore up and down that they were going to run away and live in the woods.

It was all a bunch of bullshit.

Wednesday was like a pay-per-view. Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, got to school as early as possible so they could be the first people to hear from the heroes of the week. Ashley had Casey and Heather tell people that she would be home for the rest of the week. Attention then turned from the missing girl to her saviors. The parking lot was crowded when I got there. It was weird seeing hundreds of people waiting for someone to show up at school. You'd think they had saved the President from an assassination attempt or something.

I would be lying if I said I didn't get up a half-hour early to see what was going to happen. This was the most newsworthy story at this school since Charles Bruxton's expulsion. That was one of the most wild days of school I've ever been to.

Tracy approached me as I stood beside the oak tree. I had been sitting under the tree for nearly twenty minutes, scanning the main road for any sign of Lauren's car. Everyone else was doing the same. "Mind if I sit here?" she asked. I nodded and sat beside her. "It's crazy, isn't it?"

"It is. I'm just glad she's safe," I admitted. She was friendly to me at the party. That means something to me.

"They're never going to shut up about this," she said. I thought I heard a bit of lamentation in her voice and it kinda concerned me. Wasn't she happy Ashley was okay? I know she didn't really like all of the people she hangs out with, but did she really hate Ashley *that much*? I decided not to question it.

Lauren pulled into a parking lot that had been reserved for her by the other popular people right at the front of the school. Hundreds of teenagers broke into applause when she and Beth exited their car. Lauren was blushing hard and gave meek waves to the onlookers. Beth was cool as ice, smiling and nodding to people who wanted to shake her hand.

That was the moment I knew I was never going to win the election. And I didn't care.

That was also the moment when the gossipers and shit-stirrers stepped forward to ask their dumb questions and get answers to the rumors circulating about Ashley's mental state. Lauren looked physically sick when people asked some of these questions.

"I heard she was in a crackhouse going through a massive bender."

"Was she really covered in blood when you found her?"

“Did you see her leave the motel with the state senator or were they fucking in his car?”

“Is it true you found her right as she cut her wrists and forced her to stay awake until the paramedics arrived?”

Lauren stepped back as the crowd got closer and closer, her face growing paler with each invasive question. Spencer tore through the crowd and stepped between the girls and the crowd. He was furious. I was a few hundred feet away and I was still terrified of him. If he had a baseball bat, he’d be swinging for their kneecaps.

“HEY!” he roared. “*Back. Off.*”

The King gave an order and the peasants obeyed. Nobody dared speak another word. Spencer and a couple of the upperclassmen football players escorted Lauren into the building while the crowd looked on. I have to say I was impressed with how he handled the situation. He was an extremely protective guy, but he didn’t lose his cool.

“Gotta hand it to him, he sure knows how to work a crowd,” Tracy said.

“I’d have taken their heads off if I was him,” I replied. “Those people are scumbags.”

“They really are, aren’t they?”

I jumped when I heard a third voice speak from behind the tree. Beth stepped out, smiling her trademarked tired smile. Tracy tensed up beside me. I could sense her crawling back a couple of inches to put some distance between her and Beth.

“Is it true you were there?” I asked. I had the same questions as anyone.

“Oh, yes. I was the one who called Casey and Heather to tell people she was safe while Lauren tended to Ashley. Then I called the police and we met up with Ashley’s Mom back at her place. Besides not really eating well for a couple of days, she was perfectly alright.”

That was the biggest relief I’d heard in ages. But I was still curious what could have driven her to run away from home for a few days in the first place. I didn’t want to pry, though. If she wanted to tell me, I’d be more than happy to listen. If not, that was her business.

“She really is a hero for helping Ashley, isn’t she,” Beth said with admiration.

“She really is.” I could tell that she really did love her just from her tone of voice alone. In some way, I was so jealous of her. Being that in love with someone and having it feel reciprocated for you was like an alien concept to me.

“And now that she is, I feel like she’s almost guaranteed to win the Presidency? Don’t you agree?”

Tracy sat forward, eyes narrowing a bit. “Spencer and Kate are still in it.”

“I mean no offense, Katherine, you’re a wonderful girl,” Beth began with the most blatant condescension I had ever heard in my life, “but unless you stop a school shooting or Lauren and Spencer both die before the vote, there’s really no chance of winning this anymore. Sorry. But just know that Lauren would be more than happy to get you positions on her staff. You would be an amazing addition to the team. Both of you.” She flashed that sweet little smile and hurried off to find her girlfriend.

That was the moment I saw what Tracy saw. Beth Hill was a massive, entitled bitch. All that play-acting with being nice to me all of last year was bullshit. I’d thought she was being a bit

two-faced before, but this was the confirmation I needed to make a real judgment of her. She would be an amazing HR representative one day. She doesn't care about anything but her own interests. And that really stung because I tried so hard to be nice to her last year when she was the new kid without any friends. I thought that maybe, just maybe, she would be different from everyone else and could have been my friend if I put in the effort. Maybe she wasn't terrible.

But she isn't innocent. She's as terrible as Tracy said. She's just another... another...

"God, what a cunt," Tracy muttered as soon as Beth was out of earshot.

Yeah, that's the right word.

"She's right, though."

Tracy turned to me and shot me a look as angry as if I had just slapped her in the face. "Don't tell me you actually agree with her?"

"I knew I never had a shot against the popular people. I don't know why I even got my hopes up to begin with. All that hard work was for nothing..."

Tracy shook her head. "No. Absolutely not. Un-fucking-acceptable. Meet me in the gym at three. We'll figure this out together."

"Don't you have student council?"

"Fuck student council" She rolled her eyes and recounted exactly how the meeting would go. "Frank, Tom, and Brad will just talk about which Sophomore has the best ass and Spencer will be reading his playbook the whole time. Do you think they ever actually *do anything* when there isn't a dance or fundraiser to worry about? They don't need me there." She pointed at Beth, who was walking into the school. "And this? This shit is personal now. Nobody hurts you and gets away with it as long as I'm here."

"I've never met anyone like you before. You're just genuinely... nice." I spoke with pure adoration. After all this time, I'd finally found a friend.

"I'm just being me. Now let's bury that fucker."

We split up and went about our days. I spent all day watching the clock religiously, anxiously waiting for my meeting with Tracy to figure out how to get back at Beth for being so conceited. I was so ready to be the bad guy for a change and get some well-earned revenge.

It was during fourth period that I began to wonder if Beth realized she was really being mean. Maybe she was stressed over everything going on. Or maybe she genuinely wanted me to work with her and Lauren and didn't know how to say it right. I know some people just aren't good at talking to people (myself included) and the way they talk might come off the wrong way than they intended. But why wouldn't she just ask to join my staff in the event that I won if she wanted to work together? The two of us combined could easily beat Spencer if I pulled out and endorsed her and vice versa. Or why not say something like "may the best girl win" and encourage me? My head was spinning all day trying to figure out how Beth thinks.

Second thoughts began to take center stage. And guilt. Lots of guilt. By the time three o'clock came, I realized just how much I regretted taking the path of revenge.

Beth

Was I a bit cruel with Katherine? Perhaps.

Diplomacy has never been one of my particular strong suites. Irony because I am enveloped in the world of high school semantics and hallway gossip. Every word could make or break you in the eyes of your peers. Personally, I do not see anyone here as my equal in anything but age and societal status. They are not my peers. They are my disposable pawns; tools to help me build the world I deserve to live in. The world *we* deserved to live in. They have no greater vision for their lives, no grand plan for the world. Weed and sex and TV and football were their entire being. Because they lack this foresight, they would have to serve as the means to my ends.

As much as I loved her, I cannot even say Lauren was my equal in some respects. She lacks the will to get ahead in life. That “whatever-it-takes no-fucks-given” attitude that others scoff at and see as idealism and an extreme sense of entitlement. She was always trying to be people’s friends. Yet she cries at night over wishing the world was better; not just here at school, but the world at large. She was worried for our future and inheriting the world our forefathers have built for us. Global warming, systematic discrimination against minorities, the economy. Anything she sees a headline for on the news before leaving for school or on Twitter when she is laying awake in the middle of the night riddled with anxiety.

But at the end of the day, she simply was not willing to do what it took to save that world she loves from certain destruction. This level of indifference is comparable to the indifference of the people who made the world the way it is in her eyes. I find it to be borderline-hypocritical and there is *nothing* I despise more than a hypocrite. Wear your bullshit like a badge of honor or shut the fuck up.

Without me by her side, nothing would change. She needed me more than she knew.

Take what happened after I spoke with Katherine as a prime example. I entered the school to find Spencer and Lauren talking off to the side by her locker. The football players who escorted them inside to evade the bloodthirsty crowd outside stepped aside so he could talk to her. They looked like the Secret Service protecting the President and his First Lady. Irony comparison given that the current President was addressing his successor. One noticeable absence was Mr. Brad Kendrick. I could not for the life of me imagine why he chose to give Lauren some space, today of all days.

Being her well-known friend, I was allowed to approach them. This was how I caught the end of their conversation.

“Don’t listen to them,” he said softly. “They’re just a bunch of assholes.”

“True, but those assholes vote for you and go over your house to get drunk every other weekend.” She had her hands folded together behind her back and swayed gently in place. She did this same thing when she wanted to get me to do something. What can I say? I’m a sucker for a ditzy idiot.

“Not this weekend, unfortunately. My Dad’s back in town.”

“Sounds like you could use somewhere else to party. You could come over to my house after I become the President,” she said with a playful wink. “I’m planning something big to celebrate. I’ll even let you wear the crown one last time.”

Spencer grinned at her. “I might just do that.”

I’d seen enough. This was more than I could bear. It only further justified what I did in my mind.

So I may have told a bit of a lie to get my story out first. Sue me. Not like Spencer was going to brag about finding her, though. To my knowledge, he had not even denied anything when pressed by his friends because he does not want whatever really happened to Ashley to get out. My guess is he found her drugs and got scared for her safety and reputation. Otherwise he would have proudly announced that she was safe to anyone who would listen. He was arrogant and as smug as they come, but he loved that girl. If he was open about finding her, people would go to him for answers. He would not be able to keep a lie up forever. He was weak and stupid. He kept quiet to protect himself more than Ashley. I spent all of my police-endorsed day off speculating his motives and this was what I came up with.

Regardless of why he chose to keep his mouth shut, I needed to know exactly where and how he found her so I can work with it. All I knew was they left this motel together. That was simply not enough.

I approached Spencer and gave him the meekest, most submissive hug I could physically manage. “Spencer, I’m so sorry about all the horrible things I’ve ever said about Ashley. I was such a massive jerk to her before. Please know that I regret it all and I promise I won’t ever say anything cruel to her again.”

Spencer hesitated, but eventually returned the hug, albeit half-heartedly. Despite my face being buried in his chest, my nose inhaling the cloud of body spray he showered himself that morning, I could tell he was looking to Lauren for an explanation. “Oh, I, um... thank you... Beth. I’ll be sure to tell her next time I see her.”

“I spent all weekend wondering if I said something that might have made her run away. She was always mean to me, but I was even worse to her. I felt so horrible. And worst of all, I didn’t think we should have looked for her! I am so, so horrible.”

A little groveling to soothe an egomaniac never hurt anyone.

“As long as Ashley forgives you, you and I have no reason to dislike each other,” he said warmly. “I’ll be sure to tell her what you said soon, though. I think she’ll be glad to hear it.”

I pulled away. Not soon enough, though. I beamed up at him. “Thank you. And believe me, I never had any real problem with her. It’s just with everything that went down last year...” I felt as though I was laying it on a bit too thick and I ordered myself to dial it back. No need to bring her into this. He was convinced and that was enough for now.

“Thank you for saying that. I do appreciate it.”

“Tell her I hope she’s okay, too,” Lauren added.

I knew she was not ready to talk to her about everything going on. Apparently they barely spoke when Lauren helped Ashley into her house. She just kept asking if Ashley was okay and

Ashley promised she was going to be fine while she cried. If she was lying to me, she was doing a damn fine job of it. I let them have alone time inside her house until I saw the flashing lights of a squad car driving toward Ashley's street. That was when I entered and made myself a direct player in the situation.

Spencer thanked us again and wished us a good day. I glared at the back of his stupid potato head as he walked away. My hatred for this boy could not have been greater than it was at that precise moment.

"Did you really mean all of that?" Lauren asked.

She was right to wonder if I was lying through my teeth. She knew I hated Ashley Williams with a burning passion, and justifiably so after everything that went down last year. Why would I suddenly change my opinion of her?

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. If I could say it to you last night, I can say it to him, too. And I'll tell her when she comes back to school next week. I am so sorry for everything I ever said about her and I want to make up for it some day."

We had an hour-long phone call the night before regarding the way everything was going to go down when we got to school. I mentally prepared her for there to be a lot of questions and a lot of attention. I tried to convince her to embrace being a hero, but she thought it was wrong to capitalize on it. Nevertheless, I intended to remind her that this was an option again.

"That's really sweet of you. And really big of you."

I could tell this genuinely made her happy. Smiles are good. Smiles are important. They betray how someone really feels. Her elation made me elated. If she was happy, I was happy. I could use this to my advantage. I spent all day and night planning that day to the letter.

Time to see if my hard work was worth the effort.

Spencer

I was still livid over the situation with the crowd in the parking lot. Those people had no right to ask those disgusting questions. I was ready to let Lauren have her moment of glory and take some of the heat off of me and Ash, but I had to step in when I heard the lies they were spewing at her. I wasn't going to let Ashley hear them when she came back. So I put them in their place. Fuck them all.

I got the call from Frank that Ashley had been "found" shortly after I dropped her off. I was initially confused about Lauren being named as the one who found her and corrected Frank. "Uhh, what do you mean, dude?" he asked. "Heather called me and said it was Lauren?"

I wanted to explain what was really going on, but I was tired. Exhausted, really. I just wanted it all to be over. So I told him I was over at Ashley's place talking to her Mom when they brought her home. Instead of painting myself as some wannabe hero, I relegated myself to the sidelines. I didn't care. I was more worried about Ashley being okay than anything. This wasn't about me. I didn't need even more stress in my life.

Frank cornered me shortly after my conversation with Lauren and Beth. It was the most positive conversation I'd had in days. What came next ruined that little boost to an otherwise shitty day. "Dude, why are you being nice to them?"

I honestly thought he was fucking with me. "What do you mean?" I asked with a confused laugh.

"They obviously spread that rumor about finding Ashley!"

"So...?"

Frank was shocked I was okay with that. I had no idea what was going through his head. Thankfully, he was polite enough to go into detail about how much of a fucking moron I am. "You told me yourself that you found her! Why would you let them lie like that?"

I took a deep breath. "Okay, look, Ash has been through enough shit lately," I explained very carefully. "I'm not going to tell anyone anything 'cause if I do, it'll only be worse."

"Tell anyone about what? What even happened to her?"

"Forget about it," I said, shaking my head. I was getting a migraine. "Just be happy she is okay and leave it at that. Please."

"But they're doing it to beat you in the election!"

You dense motherfucker. Is that all you care about? Ashley went missing and you care more about me winning a high school election than her well-being? I should fucking strangle you, you ignorant piece of shit.

That's what I should have said. Instead, I tried to put my old friend in his place as gently as possible. "Enough about that stupid election. We've got a big game on Friday and I feel like I'm going to jump off a bridge with all of... *this!* going on so please, for the love of God, stop bitching about some meaningless bullshit. It's pointless! I haven't slept well in days. I just... I need a break, man. *Just one day.* Fuck!"

I'd never snapped at Frank before. Ever. He wore his confusion and shock plain in his eyes. "Shit, man, I'm sorry. It's cool. I feel you, man. I do."

“I’ll see you in class.”

I shouldn’t have yelled. I regretted doing it immediately. My stomach was in knots. I had to get out of there or else I was going to flip out again, though. Frank was just looking out for me. Much as I want to punch him in his stupid fucking face, he’s just being a good friend. I had to hide in the guy’s locker room just to escape everyone’s gaze until classes started. I wanted to try to fake being sick just to go home, but the team needed me to be there at practice. I got an okay to miss yesterday, but I could tell my coaches weren’t happy about it. A late arrival and an absence back-to-back made me look like a shitty captain. And besides, my dad would never come to get me unless I was lying dead on the gym floor.

When I got to English class, I was in for an even worse surprise.

Now I respect Mr. Hardy. He’s one of those teachers who treats you like an adult despite being twenty years older. But he isn’t like the horror stories you hear online with a teacher who forgets he isn’t actually *in* high school anymore and ends up being the creep that tries to smoke weed with you at your Graduation Party or hooks up with a Senior girl as soon as she graduates after three years of eying each other up and being the topic of “Will They/Won’t They?” gossip because they did such a shit job of hiding their mutual attraction. Hardy was honest and approachable and willing to listen to your issues and give real life advice. He’s a good guy.

But today was one of those days where even the coolest person you know does something that just pisses you right the fuck off.

“Alright, now that everyone is here,” he said after the second bell rang, signaling the start of class, “I have an announcement to make. About Ashley Williams.” I didn’t think they would make a big deal about it now that she had been found safe and sound, but apparently even the staff wanted to address the issue. I braced myself for more gossip and discussion. “She’s been found, alive and apparently unharmed. The police have been contacted and her mother informed us she is very grateful for everyone’s efforts in bringing her daughter home. She is especially grateful that our own Lauren Bradshaw was able to find her after all that worrying. So, on behalf of the school, thank you, Lauren.”

Lauren was blushing hard as the whole room clapped for her. I joined in as much as I was expected. I was happy for her, I really was, but would they be this enthusiastic when Ashley came back on Monday? Or would this just be last week’s news and everyone will have moved onto the next topic by then?

“But she *is* okay, right?” Tracy asked Lauren when the clapping died down.

I spoke up for her. “I saw her this morning. Her mom said she was doing good.”

“Thank you for telling us, Spencer,” Mr. Hardy said warmly. “I’m sure this has been very difficult for you and I’m sorry you’re going through all this. Right, well, we have to discuss book reports due next week so I hope you’ve caught up on your reading.”

I’m a humble person to an extent. Not making this whole thing about myself should prove that. I could have explained that this whole thing was a misunderstanding and *I* was the one who found Ashley and brought her back home. But I didn’t because it wasn’t my place to do

so. I respected her privacy too much and didn't want to accidentally let slip what I found while searching her room. If I did, I'd never forgive myself.

And here was Mr. Hardy, a high school English teacher, making the whole thing about *me* and saying that it must have been painful for *me*. All because I'm her ex-boyfriend. Woe is me, I must be so hurt that she ran away. How could I ever recover? It's not like she could have been dead or anything. Nobody reached out to see if she was okay outside of her immediate group of friends. They just hounded the other people involved to get information to satisfy their craving for gossip. They're nothing but a bunch of fucking leeches.

When class finally ended, I was the first one out the door despite being in the back of the room. I couldn't hide my disdain, my rage. I nearly ran over Lauren as she stepped out of her desk. I had to get as far away from this classroom as possible. It felt like everyone was staring at me. How could I hide the look on my face when I was so pissed?

I retreated to the safety of the gym locker room. It wasn't as big as the football team's locker room down by the backdoor leading to the field, but it had a large bathroom and shower area attached to it that made it seem much larger than it was. Inside, I could have my meltdown. I waited for the hallway to be clear so no one would hear what was going to happen. But instead of punching a locker door or swearing a little, everything came out. The exhaustion, the stress, the anxiety, whatever emotions I had inside of me came pouring out. I absolutely exploded.

The first thing I saw was a wooden chair. It got hurled straight into the wall, leaving a large scuff on the concrete and timber on the ground.

Next was the bench that wasn't bolted down. I grabbed it with both hands and sent it spinning across the room, a spiral so perfect an NFL scout would be in awe.

I sidekicked locker doors and battered bathroom stall walls with my now-bloodied fists.

I removed my shoe and threw it with all my might at the bathroom mirror. I wasn't expecting it to shatter into a million pieces. Shards of glass shot out and clattered all around the ground. I wanted to take a piece and slit my wrists right there and then everyone would pity whoever found me and make them a hero for a day.

"Spencer!"

I guess my savior had arrived. It was a girl. I didn't care. I was still seeing red. I needed to destroy every piece of garbage in this fucking place. My blood was boiling. Fuck that school and fuck everyone who goes there. I retreated back into the locker room to get away from whoever saw me. They could watch me from the bathroom.

"Spencer, please stop!"

I turned to see who was interrupting my moment of self-pity. Lauren looked at me, mortified of the monster I was. Seeing the horror in her eyes, I thought she was Megan for a second. She saw me after I flipped out at home one day over something that happened at school a year ago and thought I was insane. I never wanted her to see me at my absolute worst ever again. Seeing Lauren look at me with that same look of fear was too much. I collapsed onto the ground, blood pouring down my knuckles.

Lauren knelt down beside me, leaving some room between us.

"It's just... he said he hoped *I* was doing alright. *Me!* He didn't even think of her or how she's doing! He didn't say anything!"

"That's not true," she said calmly.

"All he cared about was me! Gotta look out for the star quarterback 'cause he's only good for making the school look good! Who gives a shit about his girlfriend, she's just a *cheerleader*, she doesn't win championships and go to Texas and make it to the NFL and have to put everyone else first! FUCK! FUCK FUCK FUCK!"

I was gasping for air by the end of my rant. My chest was tight and there was a searing pain in my forehead from lack of air. I wished I could have just died right there. I couldn't take it anymore.

Then Lauren said the one thing that grounded me. "Spencer, please, you're scaring me."

I felt the color drain from my face when I looked at her, my vision blurry from the tears. The look of pure terror in her eyes snapped me right back to reality. I was disgusted with myself for what I was doing. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry please don't be afraid I'm sorry."

Lauren held my bloodied hand as I cried harder, careful to avoid my knuckles. "We care about Ashley. We all do. We're worried about you, too. But not because of football or any of that. We care because you're a *good guy*. You care about other people, you don't deserve to feel like this—"

"Yes, I do," I blurted out. "I'm a piece of shit and I deserve everything I get."

"Don't say that."

I don't know what compelled me to say it. It just came out. "If my sister wasn't at that house, I'd..." I regretted it instantly. I knew she was judging me. I could feel it. This was the dark part of my mind that I never opened up about and here I was just spilling my soul and it was going to get me in trouble. Fuck me, man...

"If you need to talk to someone..."

"I tried. I tried three different therapists. I can't... talk about it..."

Lauren shuffled in closer, making sure to give my hand an encouraging squeeze. It hurt. "But you're talking right now!" I didn't respond so she continued on. "How about me, you, Beth, and whoever else you trust get together sometime after school or on a weekend or whenever and just talk. Believe me, it can be really helpful and I think it'd do you good."

"Why would you do that for me? I mean I was dating your..."

Oh, fuck.

Lauren backed away in shock. "So you know?"

I expected her to try to deny it. "Fuck. Okay, wait, no, it's okay, I won't tell anyone, I promise. But... she told me the night we broke up."

She gave this sort of shocked laugh. Like it was the only noise she could make after having her world turned upside down by one little piece of information. I was only one person. I wondered if anyone else knew.

"I won't tell anyone," I assured her again. "Promise."

“I believe you. It’s just...” She shook off her own issues to focus on mine again. “You’re not the only one who hurts. If you ever need to talk, you can come to me. Or Beth. She’s a really good person, even if she can be a bit harsh sometimes. She does genuinely hope Ashley is going to be okay. She cares. And so do I.”

I wiped away my tears and smiled. “Thank you.”

It felt good to cry into her shoulder. It felt like someone actually cared.

Beth

I had spent all day and night planning my next move with Lauren, Katherine, and the others. Every detail was in place, every move calculated. It was not one of my finer schemes. Nevertheless, it would serve my purposes just fine.

What I did not plan for was this development between Spencer and Lauren.

Seeing them together threw a wrench in all of those plans. I threw them out immediately. They were old. Obsolete. My new strategy would be much more relevant to the current situation at hand. The more data I collected, the better it would be. I was a walking science experiment.

Seeing them together once was bearable. But twice? I would not stand for it.

I won't lose her. I can't fucking lose her.

The worst part of emotional outbursts and fits of sadness is your brain is more trusting of other people and more willing to divulge secrets or feelings you wish to keep buried. That was one of the most informative conversations I have heard or seen in a long time. It made everything so much clearer and gave my purpose in life so much context.

But this puts one issue above all else: Spencer Barnett must be eliminated.

Not just from the race, but from the school itself. He and Lauren became too close for my liking and that needed to stop immediately. Any other situation and I would be completely indifferent to it. The handsome star quarterback with daddy issues and the hot closeted bisexual volleyball captain made a cute couple. Endearing, really.

But I'd die before I let someone else get between me and Lauren.

The question was how do I do it? I did not need him dead, per se. Incapacitated or expelled would be the optimal outcome. Far less evidence that could come back to me. Who can I talk to that has all the dirt possible to get what I wanted, though? Who here knew enough about him that I could extract something of value?

I saw her walking to lunch with Katherine and had my answer.

Tracy

Lunch was filled with people discussing the Ashley situation. Without Spencer there to enforce a code of silence, people had a free pass to say whatever dumb theories they could come up with. It was all very sad. She might have her head up her ass most of last year, but Ashley wasn't a bad person. Not really. I felt bad for her. I hoped she got the help she clearly needed.

Kate and I had separate classes following our break so we waved goodbye and promised to meet later in the gym. I had a little plan in mind for how to deal with the likes of Bethany Hill. I hoped I would never have to see her again after we were done with her.

Beth stepped out of an empty classroom and smiled at me as I stopped dead in my tracks. "Hello, Ms. Summers. I'm sorry for scaring you. I need your help."

She stepped aside so I could enter. I actually feared for my safety if I didn't do exactly what she told me to do so I avoided her eye contact and slowly entered the room. The morbid part of me half-expected there to be a guy with a gun inside ready to blow my brains out.

Beth shut the door behind her and locked it. This was when I realized I should have acted on my gut instinct and stayed away.

"Beth, listen, I didn't tell anyone about—"

"I know you didn't tell anyone about our little chat and that is the last thing on my mind right now. Tell me everything you know about Spencer."

My words caught in my throat. Of all the topics to have a secret conversation about, why him? Was this about the election? Jesus, she really was insane. She cocked her head to the side, waiting for me to speak up.

"Like...?"

"Interests, hobbies, friendships outside of school, relationship with his family. Anything."

I thought it over, but my mind went completely blank. I was more concerned with the prospect of needing to fight her if she tried anything. She had this... *look*. Something in her eyes that said I either gave her exactly what she wanted or I wouldn't walk out of here alive. I had a locked door in front of me I'd need to get through in addition to Beth herself.

"Well?"

"Okay, okay. Um... well, he really loves football so—"

She gave me a series of enthusiastic claps and smiled so wide. "Give your brother a kiss on the cheek when you get home for finding such a good ophthalmologist." She dropped her feigned enthusiasm as quickly as she began to show it. "Helen Keller could have told me he likes football, you fucking idiot."

I couldn't think of anything else. I was drawing a total blank. I was scared. "Please don't hurt me." It was all I could think to say.

"Hurt you?" She was genuinely confused as to why I would even suggest something so rash. "Why would I hurt you?"

I had to think of something before I passed out. My lungs were on fire. I was getting dizzy. I ended up blurting out, “He has a violent nut allergy. Like, if he’s even at the same lunch table as someone who’s eating a PB&J, he’d have a reaction.”

“I’ll be sure nobody throws any walnuts at his head anytime soon.” She unlocked the door and motioned for me to leave. “Fine. Go. You’re free to leave. I’m glad we had this chat.”

I wasted no time running out of the room. I had to get as far away from that girl as physically possible. I sprinted down the hallways and made for the nearest girl’s bathroom. I locked the stall door behind me and curled up on the toilet, trying to catch my breath. For someone so small, she was the scariest human being I had ever met. I really do believe she was capable of murder, if she hasn’t already done it.

Then I stopped to think.

Why was I afraid of this girl? She was a Gus Fring wannabe. A dollar store Tony Soprano. She’s overprotective of her girlfriend and intimidates people who she doesn’t like. But what could she possibly do except talk a big pile of shit? She wouldn’t actually murder someone. She’s a pathetic bitch who deserves everything that was coming to her. I was never so sure I wanted to take someone down than I was at that exact moment in time. She deserved it.

Kate and I would fundamentally ruin her together.

When I left the bathroom, I went straight to the cafeteria. If I was right, he’d be having lunch right now. I scanned the room from the doorway and saw him sitting alone in the corner. I figured he would be alone. *Couldn’t let anyone too close*, he claimed.

We made the mistake of crossing that line before. It made me sick to even think of it.

I only had \$30 in my wallet. I’d be begging for lunch money for the next week or so until my brother could get me more, but it was worth it. This phone was worth its weight in gold. I ended up needing to pay him another twenty bucks by this time next week because, in his own words, *Prices went up since last year*. He tried to brag that he would make anybody else in the world pay it tomorrow or he’d charge double, but he’d make an exception for me given our history. I wanted to tell him to fuck himself, but I knew he’d make me pay up if I did.

I got written up by Ms. Kendall for being so late to Biology Class. She was furious I had been gone for so long. It was only the second demerit I ever got in my entire time as a student. I didn’t care. I got what I wanted.

My meeting with Kate couldn’t come soon enough. I wasn’t holding back anymore. We were going to fucking crucify her. It would be the highlight of my life.

Beth

God, what a useless idiot. But I figured she was still useful in some regard so I was stuck with her for the time being. Nevertheless, that was a minute of my life that I would never get back and I planned on holding a candlelight vigil for those sixty seconds of wasted existence.

“He loves football.”

Christ Almighty...

Spencer

I was hoping the rest of the day would go by like a blur. Just an easy day where I could shut my brain off and coast through classes without giving the bare minimum effort. I couldn't focus on anything except what happened in the locker room and I really didn't care if I got in trouble for it. What would they do? Expel me? That'd be perfectly fine with me. I don't care anymore. My dad might give me shit, but I'm not afraid of him anymore. He'd probably just use it as an excuse to force me into one of those factory schools like IMG Academy.

My knuckles were still raw and aching from the beating I gave the bathroom stalls. I had to go to the nurse to get them wrapped afterward. Lauren went with me. It was so refreshing to have someone actually give a shit about me. She's different.

"What happened to you?" the nurse asked as she cleaned the blood off.

"I tripped and stopped myself from hitting the wall with my fists," I said. It was such a stupid awful horrible lie. "Beats getting a concussion, right?"

My little date to the nurse's office with Lauren was over as quickly as it began. She left me when the bell rang and we didn't see each other for another five whole minutes when we sat down for our next class. You couldn't get me to pay attention to my American History class if you paid me. It was awful. Mr. Cole was just not a good teacher. Something in the back of my class woke me from my post-outburst haze. I turned my head back to see what noise I was hearing in the very back of the room. Lauren and Beth must have been whispering or something because they were smiling and trying to pretend they were being quiet. When Lauren glanced in my direction, she almost burst out laughing.

The P.A. clicked on and static filled the room, interrupting the PowerPoint we were being forced to listen to. Mr. Cole drone on through. "Would Spencer Barnett please report to the Front Office? Spencer Barnett to the Front Office. Thank you."

Mr. Cole gave me a questioning look. I shrugged and hurried off. I had no problem missing a bland lecture on the French and Indian War. It's nothing I hadn't heard a dozen times before back in grade school or in YouTube videos that summed it up in better detail in less than fifteen minutes.

When I stepped into Mr. O'Reilly's office, he motioned for me to sit down. He stared at my hand as I entered the room. I wondered if he knew it was me. I got a little nervous.

"Hello, Spencer," he began. "How is your day going?"

"Fine," I answered. "Am I in trouble?"

"Why would you think that?" I shrugged. "Well trust me, you're not in trouble," he continued, "but we do need to have a chat about that party you threw. It's about Ms. Williams."

I forced myself not to tense up. I was already on edge about what happened earlier, I did not need to talk about it again with this guy. "What do you want to know?"

"Was she acting weird? Unhappy, sad, angry?" He made little hand motions with every adjective. He tried to sound very friendly and formal, but I could hear the insincerity in his tone. There was nothing I hated more than a hypocrite. Or a liar.

"She seemed on edge, but I don't..." I didn't have the words.

"My question is," he pressed on, "was she on drugs while she was over your house?"

"Drugs? Like pot or—"

"Well," he cut me off, "I was thinking something a bit more extreme than marijuana. Cocaine. Or maybe MDMA or some other party drug."

His stare cut through me. I focused all of my energy into not letting my face betray myself. "Molly? What, no, she... why would you ask that?"

"Rumors spread fast around here and one is about Ms Williams'... um... *extracurricular activities*, so to speak. We've heard from multiple sources that Ms. Williams has an addiction to certain illegal substances and we wanted to know if, maybe, this had anything to do with her disappearance over the weekend."

I frowned at him. "She's not a junkie, if that's what you're suggesting."

"Spencer, I'm not trying to accuse someone of anything," he replied, impatiently. "We only want to follow up on anonymous reports we received recently. Ashley Williams is a valued member of our community and we just want what's best for her."

What a crock of shit.

"I can't believe you would even ask me that! She's a good person!" I didn't care that I was basically yelling at him. Fuck him. How could he ask me this? I knew he's never actually going to look out for her. He was just looking for an excuse to get rid of a problem before it began to affect him personally.

O'Reilly took a deep breath and shook his head. "We're just trying to find a reason why she ran away in the first place. If for no other reason than for her mother. And if drugs are involved, we'd need to get into contact with the authorities. To protect her."

I stared him down. I was done with this conversation. "She doesn't do drugs."

He gave me a long, telling look. He knew I'd never betray her. "Alright. I believe you. I'm sorry for upsetting you. I'm only trying to help her."

I'm only trying to help her. That, like the thing Mr. Hardy said back in English, set me off. If I wasn't already so exhausted from my blowup in the locker room, I'd have torn his room apart, too. "If you really want to help her, be sure to tell anyone who spreads that rumor that they're bullshit lies and they should be ashamed of themselves. Maybe, just maybe, it's shit like that that drove her to run away to begin with."

I stood to leave and made it as far as the doorway.

"Spencer."

I turned back, glaring over my shoulder.

"One of the janitors found the gym locker room was vandalized about an hour ago. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?"

"She's not a drug addict."

I stormed out before he could say another word.

That was when I decided I was done with this school. Like, really done. I needed a break. I needed to get away for a bit and worry about what mattered most. When the last period bell

rang, I gathered everything I needed from our lockers and headed straight for my truck. Tracy and the others could handle student council today. I knew where I was needed most.

I arrived at Ashley's house a few minutes later. I held a stack of her textbooks and homework in my arms and struggled to ring the doorbell. After a few seconds, the doorknob turned and Ashley poked her head out. She looked a lot better than when I found her. She looked like she was in the middle of a vacation, though she was clearly very wary to open the door. I wondered if she was being hounded by the press.

"Spencer?"

I held out her homework. "You know it's bad to fall behind in school, right?"

She chuckled and held the door open for me to enter. I had no regrets about skipping football. I knew where I was needed most. Right here.

Beth

The easiest way to get Lauren Bradshaw to do anything was to get in her pants. She's a hormonal teen, same as everyone at this school, and the prospect of some chemically-induced pleasure was more than enough to win her to my side. Having sided with Spencer and Ashley earlier, she was already very happy with me and would have loved to return the favor. I just needed a time and place.

You would think a public hookup was the last thing a couple in the closet should even consider. Given the circumstances, I believe it was exactly what was warranted. The thrill of potentially being caught only made it even more arousing and with my copy of the Master Key I created from the original located in the janitor's closet, I was able to ensure we could spend quality time together wherever we wished. He really should lock his office when he goes away from his desk.

The tables in Mr. Cole's American History class are special. They seat two people and the partners are forced to sit rather close together. Shorter people can make it work, taller people need to sit with a leg out to the side. Myself and Lauren could sit comfortably apart, but the prospect of being close together was too enticing. We used the close quarters mixed with sitting in the back corner of the classroom with the icing on the cake being our respective left and right handedness to be able to hold hands and whisper little jokes and compliments into each others' ears for a solid hour and twenty minutes.

It was a simple joy, but we felt we deserved it.

We may not be able to make out on the football field during the Homecoming King and Queen announcements, but we could hold hands and reaffirm our love for one another in front of everyone with no one being the wiser.

While going through our routine of holding hands in the dark classroom while Mr. Cole monotonically recited information on the French and Indian War for probably the thirtieth time in his life, I decided then was the best time to make my move. No one could see us unless they were crawling underneath the desk like vermin.

With my free hand, I scribbled a note on a piece of paper I tore out at the start of class for this exact purpose. It was nothing but a simple love letter written in our special little code we came up with over the summer when we were deep in the honeymoon phase. We devised it for the explicit purpose of being able to profess our love like all the other hetero couples without fear of being caught.

Despite it being a secret language, the meaning behind the phrases is quite ingenious:

1. *You're a hotdog.* - "You're beautiful."
2. *You're cool whip.* - "You're an amazing person."
3. *I like cheese fries.* - "This is super cheesy, but I really love you."
4. *Can I borrow a \$20?* - "Let's go out tonight. You're (the recipient of the note) buying."

Lot of food jokes. Not sure why we settled on that as the basis of our secret language.

It was silly and childish, but it gave us a cheap laugh and anyone who suspects anything would just see two good friends being goofy with one another with a dumb inside joke they will

forget about ten minutes later. Despite my desire to be professional and serious whenever possible, I was capable of letting my hair down and enjoying the simple things. After all, it's not like I'm not a sociopath.

Making sure my penmanship was as perfect as it could be while using my non-dominant hand to write, I gave her a very special note I only broke out when I absolutely wanted her to know how badly I wanted to spend time with her.

5. *Olivia Newton-John*. - Translation: Let's go somewhere quiet and have some disgusting, awful fun together. Why Olivia Newton-John? I really don't know. We both thought she looked crazy hot in *Grease*, much as I despised that movie. That is a rant for another lifetime, but seeing her in that leather catsuit? Woof.

I slid the note across the desk, slowly to build some sense of anticipation. To my dismay, she was falling asleep in her chair. Her dominant hand was propping her head up as her eyes struggled to stay open. I had somehow not noticed her hand beginning to slip out of my grasp beneath the desk. This would not stand. I was not just a hormonal teen trying to have sex with her girlfriend, I was a loyal friend who refused to have her friend get in trouble for sleeping in class. Girlfriend of the Year material.

I cleared my throat. Softly, but enough to be heard by the table in front of me.

Nothing.

I coughed, a little louder.

Still nothing.

I worried someone would hear me and look at us. I had to be stealthy on this one. Left with no other option, I realized I had to break out the big guns for this one.

I took my now-freed hand and gave Lauren the simplest of nudges to the ribs. An unfortunate mistake. I thought she was going to jump out of her seat, she was so scared. Guess I underestimated how much strength I put into it. Whoops. My bad.

She looked around the room, trying to gauge if someone saw her jump. She turned to me, eyes wide. "What are you doing?"

I suppressed a laugh and pointed to the paper on the desk.

Lauren opened it and read it over a couple times. I must have really startled her because she took a few seconds to understand one of our simplest code phrases. When she finally realized what I was saying, she smiled and shook her head. I saw Spencer turn back to see what was going on. I hoped he got a good, long look at us so he knew to stay out of my way and leave us alone. She was mine.

"Don't fucking scare me," she joked under her breath.

We went back to holding hands again. Since she did not say no, I assumed it was a yes. Consent is key, folks.

We spent the rest of the class getting as handsy as possible. I massaged her palms with my thumb. She rubbed her hand along my jeans. Since she was wearing cutoffs, I was able to massage her thighs. No one in the whole room was any bit the wiser. We experienced a minor

interruption when Spencer got called to the office, but I made sure to get things going again as soon as the room died down a bit.

I could feel the master key in my pocket, calling to me. I wanted this as badly as she did.

“Meet me in the equipment room by the gym at the end of the day,” she finally whispered, forcing my hand away from her inner thigh and back onto my own lap. A few more minutes and who knows what could have happened.

Sometimes being bad feels so good.

Tracy

Kate finally got to the gym after the final bell rang. I decided to skip Student Council. I made this decision when I saw Spencer packing things up to leave before our little half-hour study break at the end of the day even began. Juniors and Seniors could leave early. I thought he had football, but I guess I was wrong. Since Spencer wasn't going to be there to do any work, why should I be forced to pick up his slack?

She climbed all the way up the bleachers to meet me in the nosebleeds. She sat down beside me and could tell I was upset. "You okay? You seem jumpy."

"That Beth girl is an absolute psycho," I muttered. "Like she honestly might be insane."

"Yeah, I'm still upset over this morning," she admitted.

"You wanna know what she did before Bio? She pulled me into a classroom and threatened me! Like actually threatened me!"

I could tell she didn't completely believe me. Giving veiled insults and passive-aggressive life advice to scare us out of the race was one thing, but threatening to physically harm me was something else entirely. I didn't blame her for not initially thinking I was being extreme.

"Why would she do that?"

"She wanted information on Spencer and she's angry at me for..." I held my breath. The words caught in my mouth. I may hate this girl, but was I really willing to ruin Lauren's life if the secret got out and the wrong people knew it?

"She got angry for what?"

I took a deep breath and accepted that Kate had a right to know. She isn't some vindictive, evil witch who would use this against either of them, especially Lauren. "Her and Lauren are a thing. Beth told me a couple days ago. And she said if I ever told anyone, she'd hurt me, but I'm at the point where I just don't care anymore. We need to stop her and if that makes me a shitty person, whatever."

Kate, to my surprise, wasn't phased at this news. Or the fact that I just outed two closeted gay girls. That was when I realized she knew as well, but that was an issue for later.

"Do you really think she would hurt you?"

"Yes!" I blurted out. "She's absolutely insane!"

Kate thought it over. Hard. She was a sweet girl. I never thought she would be in the business of revenge. But to my shock, she looked back up at me and asked with a stone face, "So what are we going to do about it?"

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" I asked. I needed the help, true, but I wasn't lying about Beth. I made sure to remind her of that. "You could ruin your reputation around here if this backfires. They could make your life miserable."

She bitterly laughed. "I'm already a total outcast here. What could they possibly do to make me even worse off than I was before? We need to get back at her. We can't let her say things like that. It's not right."

Kate was the closest thing to a friend I had ever had. A real friend.

“No. No, we can’t.”

“So what are we going to do?”

The gym doors opened and we got really quiet, waiting to see who entered. We heard laughing and giggling from two girls. I realized they were Lauren and Beth as soon as they stepped inside. They were dancing around the basketball court. They spun each other around and nearly fell over. At one point, they embraced and kissed each other with so much passion, I thought they were going to strip each other down and do it right there. They restrained themselves and ran toward the staircase leading to the equipment room and the back door that led to the football field.

Seeing Beth actually being human was eye-opening. It made me realize I could somehow hate someone even more than I already did before. She did not deserve happiness. She was fake. She was a monster. I wondered what that made Lauren if she couldn’t see the devil she was dating. Was she blind or blissfully ignorant or desperate? What I did know was I could not trust her. No matter what I did, she was going to be on Beth’s side through and through. I wasn’t going to risk trying to save her. She was going to have to go down with her little girlfriend.

“Wow.” was all Kate could say.

My hand brushed by my pocket and felt the outline of the phone inside.

I sat up straight and stared at the staircase, my eyes fixed on the opened double doors. A plan began to form in my mind. Revenge was a dish best served cold.

“I’ve got an idea.”

Katherine

“What are we doing here?”

Tracy quietly shushed me and beckoned for me to creep forward with her. I felt like the worst sniper ninja in the world. I could hear my heartbeat echo in my ears. It felt like every step I made was as loud as crashing headfirst through a glass door.

We approached the equipment room and stopped to listen. The door was still open just enough to look inside and see a small portion of the room. We could hear Beth and Lauren furiously making out inside. I felt a flush of embarrassment listening in on two people having... *God, and in the equipment room?* This is where the football team stores their dirty laundry and pads and stuff. Were they so desperate that they'd hook up in *there*?

“You're gross,” one of them said.

“I know,” the other replied. They laughed and went back to making out.

At least one of them felt the same way as I did.

Tracy was fumbling with something in her pocket. I tried to figure out what it was, but I was too busy checking up and down the hallway leading to the room to make sure we weren't all about to be caught that I didn't see it was a phone until she pulled it out to show me.

What was strange to me was I saw the outline of a phone in her pocket. It looked like a flip phone. I used to have one back in grade school. It was the first cell phone I'd ever gotten in my life. Why did she need two phones when she had a perfectly good smartphone?

“What are we doing here?” I asked as quietly as humanly possible as she fiddled with the lock screen.

“Getting revenge,” she muttered. I'd never heard someone sound so angry. The phone sprang to life and Tracy quickly switched to the camera. I realized what she was going to do as she crept towards the door. I reached out to pull her back.

“Wait,” I whispered as my arm reached out to cover the camera, my eyes wide at how deathly serious she was with doing this. “I just meant some dumb prank or something to get at her. You're not actually thinking of doing this, right?”

“Why not?”

“They'll hear you,” I pleaded.

Passionate moans echoed through the hallway. I felt so icky hearing that.

“You sure about that?” she asked with an evil smirk.

“This is a terrible idea.”

She shushed me again and crept inside. She quickly snapped as many pictures as she could from around the corner before creeping back out to rejoin me in the hallway. We hurried away as more squeals of pleasure drowned out our footsteps.

Tracy ran ahead of me and started laughing and dancing in the main hallway. I couldn't believe my eyes. I wasn't happy with Beth either, but this was low. Really low. And I think it's illegal, too. Lauren didn't deserve to get caught in this whole thing and the fact that Tracy was getting genuine pleasure from this?

“Tracy, stop!”

Tracy turned, but could not suppress the grin stretching from ear to ear.

“Seriously, cut it out.”

“What’s wrong? We won! We can bury that bitch!”

“That wasn’t cool! Why would you even do that?!”

Her smile faded and her laughter died down. “Think about it,” she explained as though I were ten years old, “this is *exactly* what we need to do to make them lose! God, just *imagine* the look on their faces if this got around school! We just need to let Beth know we have these and she’ll do whatever we say. She’s stuck. We *won*.”

It was like I was talking to another person. The sweet girl I had befriended so fast was as evil as she claimed Beth was. I slowly began to step backward. I had to get away from this. Away from her. I could go to prison for this. Or Hell...

“Tracy...”

“Do you want to win this election?” she asked.

I only stared at her. I had nothing else to say. Nothing could convince her this was wrong. I was as trapped as they were about to be.

“Just hear me out for a sec. Nobody’s gonna get hurt, *trust me*. All we need to do is tell Lauren someone has the pictures and sent them to us because we’re running against each other and they said if she doesn’t quit, they’ll get spread around. Then when Beth confronts us, we show her that we have printed copies and say we have more and they’ll get spread around if she doesn’t convince Lauren to drop out. It’ll be just like the Victoria thing, except Beth actually deserves it. They’ll be helpless and she’ll *have* to quit.”

“But what if Lauren realizes we have the originals?”

“Beth will convince her that there’s pictures of me as well,” she stated, very matter-of-factly. “I mean, no offense, but she’ll know we were lying if we said there were pictures of you, but we can convince her if it’s me. She won’t want me to get hurt. All Beth needs to do is see that we mean business.” When I didn’t respond, she sighed. “Alright, okay, just stay back and let me handle this one and we’ll be fine. Okay?”

I could only nod. Tracy stepped forward and hugged me. I could feel the blackness in her soul seeping into my skin. I wanted nothing more than to get away from her.

“You won’t regret this. I promise.”

I knew I was trapped. Tracy couldn’t be made to see reason. She thought this was justified. How she could justify this in her mind, I really don’t know. What I did know was that I needed to stop this from happening. One way or another, I needed to make her stop this. I know for a fact there’s good in her and this was just her acting out or something. She’s just hurting from whatever Beth did to her earlier. But I can’t make excuses for this or justify it in any way. This is evil. I don’t know what could drive her to this point.

What I did know was I was stuck with her in this insane scheme that could ruin Lauren and Beth if the pictures got out. I had to stay on Tracy’s good side before I tried something. After that, I could run far away until she calmed down and realized she was acting crazy.

But not before I got that phone. I could not let her keep it.

Ashley

Spencer was very sweet for bringing me my homework. I told him the second I invited him inside that I wasn't actually going to do it, but it's the thought that counts.

I can't help but wonder if he thinks these gestures will make me fall in love with him. Like actually fall in love with him. He's been so sweet to me since the party. I hoped he understood it would never happen. To his credit, he never even tried to even touch me since he got to my place. I figured that meant he understood that we're fully through. He'll find someone better in no time. He deserves that much. He's a good guy.

Every time I tried to think of the party, I felt sick. I had no memory of the last half-hour or so before I went under. All I remember was feeling really dizzy and then I guess I blacked out in the guest room. Something about it makes me feel horrible, though. I've blacked out before, but never like this.

The first thing I asked him when he showed up was why he was here and not at football practice. They had a big game Friday and a single loss could be enough to knock them out of playoff contention if they don't win.

"If they can't win without me, they can't win with me," he declared.

Much as I appreciated the company, I wasn't sure I wanted to be responsible for him being kicked off of the team. When I voiced this viewpoint, he shrugged it off and said it didn't matter. I wasn't sure how to respond to that so I held my tongue.

One thing I noticed since we began dating over the summer was his apparent growing hatred of football. Despite having a professional career all but lined up for him, he seems to hate the sport. I wondered why that was. One day I finally worked up the courage to ask him. Before I could, however, he started telling me all about practice and how the team seemed to really be coming together. He wouldn't shut up about how proud he was of the guys and how he got a call from the Athletic Director from USC saying they were going to be watching this season closely. He's never really told me where he wants to go to college, but I know USC and it is a great school. I know his dad is dead set on Texas, though. I think he'd do well out there. I know Lauren had her heart set on USC for a while. I wondered if she still wanted to go there.

Spencer and I sat around the house for about an hour before he stood up and yelled, "I am *soooooo boooooored*." My ears bled from his bitching.

"Oh, poor you," I whined. "I'm so sorry my day off is boring for you."

"Okay, I'm tapping out. No more of this. Let's go do something! Get out of the house!"

I smirked at him. "I *just* ran away from this house, remember?"

"It's not running away if someone knows where you're going."

The dopey look on his face was too endearing. As much as I wanted to stay in and avoid whoever might be around town, I could use some fresh air. Plus it would be nice to actually do something on my day off besides eat and sleep. That's all I've done since Sunday.

We jumped in his truck and began our afternoon off. No plans, no destination, just driving around and forgetting life. Spencer and I passed the time with a duet of Shania Twain's

“(Man) I Feel Like A Woman” and I can safely say that he should never perform karaoke in his life ever. I was in tears when he tried to hit high notes. I thought the poor guy got his balls crushed in a vice grip.

After a nice cruise around the city with the radio drowning out my sorrows and Spencer violating my eardrums with the affront to music he called singing, we finally had to come to a decision of what to do. I’ve never been great with long car rides so the chance to stretch my legs was the only thing on my mind.

“How about the park?” I suggested.

“The park it is.”

We arrived at Joe Pool Lake a little after four-thirty. I called my Mom to make sure she wouldn't come home to an empty house and worry about where I was. She was upset that I left home without telling her first, but when I told her I was with Spencer she seemed to lighten up. She really admired him. I was dreading the conversation with her about the breakup. The only other conversation I was more afraid of with her was the one where I explained why I was never dating a boy ever again. I figured they were both going to happen at the same time so I was cool with putting them off for as long as possible. I didn't think she'd hate me for it. She seemed to be a very open-minded person. Granted we never discussed politics or social issues because she was always busy, but I guess she's more progressive than some of the other parents. But if she's anything like her own mother, I'm going to be living on other people's couches for the rest of my life. That was my biggest fear.

Brushing aside my little bout with anxiety over my potentially ruined relationship with my mother, Spencer and I got out and began our little stroll along the lakeside. It was a beautiful day out, albeit very very hot. The trees were a nice escape from the overbearing sun. As much as I loved cloudless days, they sucked during the summer and fall. We sat underneath a tree and took in the view.

Joe Pool Lake consisted of many beaches, campgrounds, a marina, and restaurants. It was an oasis in the middle of some of the most developed city in the country. You could go swimming at eleven and get downtown in time for a Cowboys game two hours later. I loved this lake so much. It was like a mini vacation spot for me. Before my parents divorced, we would come down here every couple weekends to relax. My mom especially needed it. Her firm was struggling badly when I was in middle school and she needed a break. There were times when I thought she was going to have a heart attack from all the stress. No kid should have to see their parents cry because of their jobs. It's too humanizing.

Spencer suggested we go get something to eat. I had eaten a couple hours earlier, but I could manage something small since he brought it up. I completely forgot that he hadn't eaten since around eleven and it was only a cafeteria lunch. Not exactly a buffet.

We ended up walking around the lake for a few minutes until we reached a pretzel stand. Before he could pull out his wallet to pay for the food and some bottles of water, I pulled out twenty bucks and shoved it in the vendor's hands.

“You know I would have paid for it, right?” he asked as we walked away.

"I know," I answered. "But this isn't a date so I figured I would cover it."

"Oh, I know it isn't a date," he said with a knowing smile. "Doesn't mean I won't buy my *friend* a snack once and a while."

"Do you buy all of your friends food?"

"Unfortunately." He sighed. "Frank eats like a pig."

We laughed and enjoyed our food as we walked along the lakeside. The sun reflected off of the water, blinding me. I didn't mind. It was gorgeous.

"Would be better with less salt," I said as I chugged down the water bottle. It was empty before I knew it. I had been drowning myself with glasses of water ever since I got home to combat the dehydration. I nearly passed out a couple times at the motel. Even though I felt like a barrel at this point, I thought I was going to die from the heat.

"Want something to drink?"

"Yes, please."

As I reached for the water, Spencer feigned tossing me into the lake. I held onto him for dear life as he pushed me closer and closer toward the water. It took a sharp jab to the ribs to get him to pull back. He groaned like a little baby, laughing as he suffered.

"I'll fucking kill you," I threatened, though it was suppressed by laughter as hard as physically possible. I wasn't giving him the satisfaction. "You know I will."

"Don't want to go for a swim?" he asked. "It's a beautiful day for a dip."

"Gee, I'd love to," I replied, "but I left my suit at home."

I threw my empty water bottle and hit him directly in the nose. I snorted.

"That's littering!" He pointed at it and started shouting at everybody and nobody. "She littered! LITTERER!"

I shushed him and hurried off. He chased after me, waving the empty plastic bottle around like a club. I don't know if he was letting me win or if he really was this slow, but I was halfway down the riverwalk by the time he started to lag behind and suck down wind. I felt my skin glistening with sweat as I stood in the middle of the walkway, waiting for him. I was forced to stop and let him catch up, pointing and laughing at him as he finally caught up to me.

"It's kind of amazing," I admired. "You throw like Peyton Manning and you run like him, too."

He flipped me off and hobbled toward the grass. I followed at a safe distance to avoid reprisal. He collapsed face-first on the grass and sprawled out like a cat. He groaned with delight at the feeling of rest.

"This is the life," he said, his voice muffled by the dirt in his mouth.

"Isn't it, though?"

"I'm glad I skipped today." He sat up and crossed his legs.

"Really?"

He nodded his head. "I'm so burnt out. I needed this." He laughed and rubbed his eyes. "God, Coach is gonna kill me tomorrow. But... I don't regret it. At all. I'm so... fucking *done* with that place. And those people. Today was terrible."

“What happened?”

He told me everything. The crowd in the parking lot. The rumors. What Hardy said and his breakdown in the locker room. O'Reilly suspecting that I had a drug problem. Everything.

As much as it hurt to hear people spreading a bunch of lies on top of knowing I was an addict, I was really glad Spencer told me. I would rather hear it from him than Danny Douchebag trying to see if I'm really a crack whore that sprawled up in an abandoned building for two days shooting up with my homeless buddies. Spencer at least knew how to phrase it so I knew he wasn't judging me in any way. He was very careful to make himself not come off as an asshole. Not many people actually choose their words. I wondered what the deal was with his hand, but I didn't want to ask. I never thought he would trash the school like that.

I don't know why I randomly said what I said next. It just popped into my mind and I couldn't stop myself. “Are you happy?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you happy,” I repeated. “Like, in general, are you happy?”

He silently thought it over for a second. “I really don't know.”

I understood what he meant. “I'm not happy. I can't remember when I ever really was.”

“With Lauren?”

“Maybe. Or maybe I tricked myself into thinking I was happy because someone at least acted like they cared about me. And I know her and she wouldn't lie and say she loved me if she didn't really mean it. She's... I don't know the word... genuine? That was what made me feel so special. I don't really know.”

She was the light of my life. She still is. I'd give anything to have her back.

I turned to him and smiled a little. As much as I could, given the circumstances. “Don't think I didn't have fun with you, though,” I added.

He looked happy to hear that. “But were you happy?”

I didn't hesitate. If that makes me a bitch then so be it. “No. Not in that way.”

To his credit, he accepted this and said he understood why. I wondered if he really did mean that. Much like Lauren, he seemed like a genuine person who wouldn't lie to me. I was sure he still had feelings for me, but all in all he was taking the breakup well. I worried today would jeopardize things until he kept talking and put my mind at ease.

“Well, the past is the past,” he said.

I decided to press the issue and see how he really felt. “Is it? I mean, I'm here with you, alone, and discussing stuff that we're dealing with like normal couples do.”

“Ah-ha,” he said as he pointed a finger at me, “but joke's on you: we didn't do this when we were dating!” He touched his finger to his head, acting like he knew all the answers to life.

“Yeah, we probably should have done that a bit more,” I admitted. “Maybe we wouldn't have broken up if we had actually talked about our feelings a bit more...”

He gave me a suspicious look. He knew I was full of shit. “*Really?*”

“Yeah, probably not, no.”

He extended his hand toward me. “Well, *friend*, I really enjoyed hanging out with you and shirking my responsibilities to have some fun. It was quite nice to have a meaningful conversation with someone.”

I shook his hand. He had a firm grip. “This was a nice *platonic* conversation, wasn’t it?”

“And hey,” he went on, “if you want help meeting any cute girls...”

I glared at him. “*Really?*”

“I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve got a career as a matchmaker.”

He brushed his hand through his short hair and pointed a finger gun at me like he was the Fonz. His hair was too short to actually get pushed back like he was an actual greaser, but it was a valiant effort and I supposed it was the thought that counts.

Even though we knew we would have to get back to our real lives soon, we decided to spend a little bit longer on that field. We watched people on boats glide around the lake. We watched swimmers race from the buoys to the sand. We watched parents with their kids, all laughing and enjoying their lives together. No worrying about football or gossip or relationships or college or family drama. The election was the last thing on our minds. School didn’t matter. All that mattered was this one single moment with the only non-judgmental friend either of us had. The only person we could confide in and know we would be safe with. Despite knowing we wouldn’t spend the rest of our lives together, I knew at that moment I could be closer with Spencer than anyone else in my life. Maybe even Lauren.

It was peaceful.

Beth

Lauren's fear of being caught by members of the football team eventually took over and we had to cut our special alone time short. Kissing just wasn't enough for me so I invited her back to my place and obviously she agreed to come over, though sadly this would have to wait because Lauren had a meeting with the volleyball team at four. We were stuck here for another hour, yearning for each other's touch. It was going to be a long, boring hour. In the meantime, we decided to spend some quality time together and walk around campus with no real destination, talking about life and our day and music and food and whatever else popped into our heads.

Our little walk took us outside to enjoy the view of the inner city. We ended up heading to the football stadium to watch the team practice for a little before we separated to do our own things. Lauren said she wanted to talk to Casey and Heather about Ashley before her big meeting. I accepted, albeit extremely unenthusiastically. They were having cheer practice alongside the guys.

When we arrived, we found the guys were in full pads and being forced to run sprints down the field and back. The head coach, Coach Mullens, was screaming at the top of his lungs. He was an older man, probably in his early sixties, but he could scream like a metal band's frontman. He was louder than the whistles. I wondered what they did to piss him off so badly.

Lauren tried to break off to talk to Casey and Heather, but they were called out onto the sideline to do some acrobatic routine. In Ashley's absence, Stacey Milner and Elena Acevedo had assumed co-captaincy of the squad until she returned. I had to wonder if they would actually give the role back up. Everyone around the school knew they despised Ashley for taking the job from them. They were both Seniors and she was just a Junior. If Ashley had not spent all of the previous school year kissing Kara's ass and snorting and smoking up whatever was put in front of her, the job should have been as good as theirs on the basis of Senior Privilege.

"This is really awkward," Lauren admitted as she waited for them to return.

"Do you miss it?"

Even though she knew her only way to get a full ride to a big university was volleyball, she clearly missed cheering. If there was time to do both *and* maintain a perfect 4.0 GPA, I would have encouraged her to go for it by pointing out that it would show colleges that she is a perfect mixture of smarts, determination, and dedication. The only thing stopping me from doing that was a combination of trying to keep her as far away from Head Cheerleader Ashley Williams and the fact that all the stress of doing two sports, schoolwork, and eventually becoming Student Council President would more than likely kill her.

"A little," she said, longingly. "I bet it's a lot better now that Kara is gone."

"I thought you liked her?"

"What? Oh, God, no. I *hated* her. She was such an asshole to everyone and after..." She stopped herself, but I knew what she was going to say. She was just trying to not hurt me by bringing up old memories. "I pretended to like her just like everyone else out there, but the truth is we were all counting the days until she graduated. Her and Kylie were the *worst*."

We watched as they did some routine that I did not care much for. Their routines that featured an overreliance on pop music sped up by twice the normal speed was extremely grating and none of them looked like they were having fun. How those competitive teams like the ones in *Bring It On* can do this stuff professionally, I have no idea. Anyone who says cheerleading is not a sport is ridiculous, but I treat it the same way as I treat baseball: I respect that people do it (though I hate some of the people who actually *do it*) but I do not care enough to sit down and watch it.

Lauren began to tap her fingers on the chain link fence that only went up to her waist, the smallest possible barricade to keep drunken teens from charging the northern side of the field. “Can those two hurry up already? I need to get back inside.”

“Could be worse,” I pointed out.

“How?”

“I could be stuck watching them puke without you beside me.”

Frank stood over one of the bigger guys on the team as he vomited on the sidelines. Frank was huffing and puffing and his face was drenched in sweat. He offered the guy a bottle of water and the guy chugged it down greedily. Bad move. He would end up getting sick again very soon.

Lauren smiled. Best pickup line ever. She then pointed to the big guy, who began to vomit again at Frank’s feet. I knew that bottle of water was a mistake.

“I’m kind of glad I’m not cheering anymore. I don’t think I could do it.”

“Remind me to never let you write my resume.”

“Why’s that?”

“You suck at selling yourself. No offense.”

She frowned, pretending to be angry. “Gee, none taken.”

I figured this was the best time to move forward with my plan to eliminate Spencer. “But in all seriousness, you really should be a bit more confident and... I don’t know how to say it without sounding like a mom. Just be *you*! You’re amazing! Take the election, for example—”

Lauren groaned. “Oh, God, not this again.”

“Wait, wait, just hear me out. Please?” I begged without sounding too desperate. “You’re smart, beautiful, popular, and one of the kindest people around.” I lowered my voice to a whisper, the music and the grunts and groans of the guys running at full speed drowning us out. “There’s a reason why I fell in love with you. You just gotta be more confident and sure of yourself. Don’t be so negative.”

She smiled again. “I swear, I try. I just—”

Our conversation was stopped short when Coach Mullens screamed at the top of his lungs in Frank’s face. The girls almost dropped Heather from the top of their pyramid out of pure shock. I can safely say that it was not hard to hear exactly what he was saying. Despite being on the other side of the field, it was like he was ten feet away. I bet Frank was pissing himself.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE’S NOT HERE?!” Coach Mullens roared. We could not hear Frank’s response, but I take it that he said the perfectly wrong thing. “YOU’RE SUPPOSED

TO KEEP AN EYE ON HIM! HE'S LIKE YOUR BROTHER, FOR FUCK'S SAKE! WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?!"

Frank said something that caused the Coach to slam his hat into the turf. "YOU TELL HIM THE NEXT TIME HE SEES ME, HE'S FUCKED! GOT IT?!"

The other players stopped their sprinting drill to watch the carnage. Seeing this, Coach Mullens unleashed a tirade of curse words and insults. He turned to address the rest of the team. "ANYONE WHO SKIPS PRACTICE WITHOUT A DAMN GOOD EXCUSE IS GOING TO RUN LAPS UNTIL THEY FUCKING DIE! GOT IT?!" I felt this was a redundant outburst as he already had them sprinting in their full pads in 100 degree heat. The boys snapped back to attention and continued sprinting while Coach Mullens made his way to the team's bench. He took the large orange cooler by the handles and overturned it, sending precious ice water into the artificial grass. On a steaming hot day like today, they might as well take the boys out back and shoot them.

Except Brad. I needed him. As well as Spencer.

Glancing around the field, I realized Spencer was not there. He must have been the one Mullens was so angry at right now. It makes sense. Austin Prep was this Friday and they were a *very* good team. After what happened last season, they were out for blood and were probably praising God Above for keeping Spencer out of their hair for the game. Being captain and all, missing practice was a very bad look. Considering what happened with Victoria and the guy who leaked her naked pictures, they wanted revenge.

"Jesus." was all Lauren could say after watching Mullens blowup.

"Yeah."

He was still screaming up and down the sidelines. I wondered how long he could hold his breath. He had not come up for air in over three minutes. Pure rage being released onto the world is a beautiful thing to behold.

"Normally I'd say to take notes from someone like that because he commands respect," I said. "but I think you should find a less Machiavellian example."

I always found people comparing tyrants and ruthless leaders to Machiavelli to be a silly waste of time. Machiavelli may have painted the picture of exactly how to be the most calculating and soulless politician in the world, but *The Prince* was written in response to the political climate in 15th century Italy. His methods may hold true today, but the world has changed and you need to be a new kind of merciless if you expect to get ahead in politics now. Just look at my own personal inspiration, Huey Long, and how he rose to prominence: a cold and ruthless greed mixed with a genuine desire to make change in the world to further his own power.

Tired of waiting, we sat down on the bleachers while we waited for Casey and Heather. The metal managed to burn me despite my wearing jeans, a decision I partially regretted because of the blistering heat. I detested short shorts. I did not want to give these neanderthals anything to gawk at while I walked around. Anyone else, fine I don't care. But on me? Absolutely not. Even short dresses for dances were alien to me. This was a prime example why.

"I would like to win," Lauren finally admitted. "I know I keep saying I don't care, but it would be nice to know people like me enough to let me lead them."

Bingo. This was my golden ticket.

"Aren't you captain of the volleyball team?"

"Yeah?"

"And didn't they elect you captain?" She nodded. "So if they are willing to put you in charge of their team, why wouldn't a school put you in charge of running bake sales and organizing dances and food drives and things like that? What's the difference between student council and captain of a sports team? I mean, don't you do clothing drives with the volleyball team already?"

"Um... well, yeah... yeah, I guess you're right."

"You're going to make a great President. And I'll be right beside you. Trust me."

The way she looked at me was indescribable. All the love we shared for one another was on full display. She trusted me with all of her heart and I trusted her with mine. If Mullens was not distracting everyone with another screaming fit, anyone could see that we were planning our wedding in our minds.

"So you're in?"

"The election is next week so I guess I have no choice." Lauren winked.

"You just stay positive and popular and be as friendly as you can with everyone you meet and keep being smoking fucking hot and I'll take care of the rest. Sound good?"

I was the brains and she was the beauty. We were unstoppable together.

Her hand inched across the scalding hot bleachers and rested against mine. If she was in pain, she did not show it. "I think I can manage that."

I was ready to get as far away from this field as possible so we could cuddle up to each other and savor every moment of our pathetic fleeting lives together. Frank ruined this pipe dream when he jogged over toward us. I could hear his labored breath from fifteen yards away. He sounded like an old truck motor. He leaned against the chain link fence and waved, her arm as weak as melting butter.

"He... hey! Lauren! Beth! You... see Spen... shit... seen Spencer anywhere lately?"

"No, I'm sorry, I haven't," she answered.

He pressed his head against the top of the fence. "Shit..." He turned and ran back to the team.

Lauren finally got a moment with the girls when Stacey and Elena allowed them a water break. I sat back and admired my victory. It sure took her long enough. Regardless, I knew we had this in the bag. There was no way we could lose this if our opposition was a nerd and an uncommitted jock who just made the entire football team, their supposed "brother," hate him.

Now all I had to do was sit back and wait for the universe to hand me my victory on a silver platter. I really do love being me.

Katherine

Tracy carefully scrubbed down the second cell phone with an antibacterial wipe. She said she was careless before and needed to scrub any possible evidence of our involvement. She wore latex gloves while she did it. *To hide fingerprints*, she claimed. I still couldn't believe she thought this was a rational response to everything going on. It made me nauseous knowing I was enabling this just by being there.

"Remind me how you got a second phone so fast?" I asked, trying to take my mind off the pit of guilt growing in my stomach.

She smirked and continued scrubbing down the phone. "You'd be surprised what people sell around here... Perfect. Now I delete this..."

She went to work with both of her phones spread out on a classroom desk. She was busy texting and deleting. It gave me time to remind myself I needed to get ahold of her phone to delete the evidence. I needed to find a way to get her actual phone out of her hands long enough to delete the pictures.

"So..." She held up the flip phone so I could see it like it was some kind of perverted picture book. "*This* is our burner phone. If worst comes to worst, we use this to send the pictures to as many people as we can so nobody has our number."

"Okay..."

"Once we send it to... say... twenty people, mostly guys, they'll undoubtedly show it or forward it to their friends and it will spread and spread and spread until the only people who don't see it are either in comas or are blind."

I wasn't amused by the analogy.

"And we'll be sure to attach some little note that says something like *Be sure to disinfect those pads 'cause now you know where they've been* or something like that so they know exactly where this took place at. Shit, I bet people will make pilgrimages there so they can fantasize about being in the same room as them."

"That's gross."

"I know, right? *Then* when teachers finally get wind of it, because how could they not find out about it with every guy in school looking at those pics before they go to bed at night, and then they go after Beth and Lauren and they get expelled and all that's left is Spencer."

Seeing that she was still fully committed to this plan, I decided to play along. I saw her delete the original copies of the pictures from her phone. All that was left was on the so-called *burner phone*. If I could get ahold of it, I'd be set. It didn't have a passcode or lock screen or anything. I could be in and out in seconds. No friendship was worth what she was proposing.

"But he will still beat me in a heartbeat," I reminded her in a vain hope she'd give up.

"Not if we plant this in his locker and get O'Reilly to do a search where he conveniently finds it sitting there."

Holy shit, she's serious. That could get him sent to prison...

“But... uh... okay, how do we get his locker combination?” I tried to suppress my labored breathing so she wouldn’t suspect my kinda sorta passive commitment to this plan. As far as she knew, I was just playing devil’s advocate to be sure she had this all planned out.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you kidding? I drop off the homework he asks me to do for him and pick up the stuff he leaves behind all the time.” She looked disgusted and the truth is, I couldn’t blame her. Being forced to do someone else’s homework and getting no recognition stings. I’ve been people’s personal cheat sheet before. Sometimes I’ll get a casual thank you and that’s it. It sucks.

But it still doesn’t justify this, though.

“And he won’t suspect you?”

“Why would he?”

“I have a really bad feeling about this.” Understatement of the century, right there.

“Okay, look, I know this sounds... a bit much... but I *need* you to trust me on this one. I’m looking out for you. We can’t let these kinds of people win. The bullies. The hypocrites. They walk all over people like you and me. This is the only way. We could make this school so much better by making sure no one ever gets threatened or intimidated by people like Beth again. But we can only do that if you trust me. Please.”

“I do.” I lied. “I’m just... scared.”

“Of what? There’s no way this can get traced back to us.”

The worst part is I actually believed that and I’d go the rest of my life knowing I ruined three lives so I could climb a few rungs up the social ladder.

“Do what you have to do.”

Tracy grinned. It was a truly evil grin. We were in this together now.

“First, we need to get a couple phone numbers,” she said. “Can you go through your phone and find as many contacts as possible? Especially guys if you can. Like I said, we need this to spread around as fast as we can. Just do me a favor...” She pulled out a notepad and a pen. “Write them down with the name of the person on here so I can add them to the contact list. I don’t want you texting it because that could leave a trail. I’m not worried about my phone showing up texting this one because nobody will check my phone records.”

I did as I was told. My hand violently shook as I copied down the numbers onto the paper. I had to stop writing to stretch my wrist and attempt to steady my hand because the writing was quickly turning to incoherent scribbles. I chose random names from my contact list. It wouldn’t matter who actually got the messages if I couldn’t stop this before it started. The pictures would be out there for everyone to see.

“Alright...” Tracy scanned the list and copied them into the phone. She entered the numbers and letters with lightning speed, but it seemed like it took an eternity. I was sweating. “Good,” she complimented. “Very good. So now I’ll find the numbers of some of the football players and enter them in, too. I’ll be right back, I’m just going to the football field to talk to Casey and Heather. I’ll tell them I’m getting a new phone and want to enter my new number in their contacts in case they need me.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Probably ten minutes max. They’re having practice, but they should take a break eventually.”

This was my one chance. I had to act.

“Want me to hold onto that so you don’t have to disinfect it again?” The excuse flowed through me like a river. I felt as smooth as James Bond covered in warm butter. If she suspected anything, I’d be shocked.

I nearly jumped for joy when she absentmindedly said, “Yeah sure. Just keep entering in more numbers while I’m gone, ’kay? I’ll be right back.” She stood and left the room without a second glance.

I stared at the little hunk of plastic. It pained me to look at it. I could do so much damage to so many people with the click of a button. Was this how Frodo felt holding The Ring? I know he’s not a real person, but I really thought I could empathize with him at that moment. For once, I had more power than anyone in this school and I could exercise it and ruin two girls’ lives if I really wanted.

I was like a God.

The door opened, startling me. I frantically looked up to see who it was while also snatching the phone away and hiding it in my lap. I prayed it wasn’t Tracy. I don’t know how long it had been since she was gone.

Beth and Lauren entered the room. My mind went completely blank.

“Oh, hey, Katie,” Lauren said, sweetly. “Sorry to bother you, but the volleyball team has a meeting here in a little while. Mind if we have the room to get ready?”

“Yeah, no, absolutely, uh...” I panicked and tried to hurry out, but realized I left my backpack and shuffled back to grab it. I could feel their eyes burrowing into my soul. I realized I looked like a total fool. I sat down and began to hyperventilate.

“Are you... okay?” Lauren asked. “You look... really upset.”

“No, no, I’m fine. I just...”

Beth took the lead and sat down to my left. Lauren followed her lead and sat in the seat to my right. “Hey, what’s going on?” Beth asked. “You know you can talk to us if you’re upset.”

I wondered if she knew I heard about what happened with Tracy. I was scared of her now.

“Yeah, seriously, if something’s wrong, we’re all ears,” Lauren assured me.

Lauren, meanwhile, was a gentle soul and nothing like Beth Hill, the monster Tracy said would haunt my nightmares. I questioned how someone so evil could be with someone so sweet. She deserved so much better than Beth.

I had to think up something to say. I had the phone buried in my hands. It was the only thing I could think of. My mind turned to Ashley and the party. It was the only thing I could draw up on such short notice.

“Well... um... at the party, Ashley told me some things...”

“Like what?” Lauren asked.

No going back now... God help me...

“About... you.” I pointed to Beth. Then slowly turned to Lauren. “And you.”

Lauren’s eyes went wide. She looked like she was going to have a panic attack. I instantly regretted this idea. It was all I had. If they knew what I was really thinking, Lauren might actually vomit. God, what is wrong with me? Why would I tell them this? Beth knows I know, but Lauren was probably buried in the closet and I just dragged her out, kicking and screaming.

“What did she say?” Beth asked, her brow furrowed.

I looked her in the eyes and tried to sound as confident and convincing as possible. “I swear I won’t tell anyone.” I meant it with all my heart.

She sighed. “I believe you. We just...”

She looked to Lauren for help. She was staring at the desk, her mouth slightly ajar and her hands curled up into fists so tight, her knuckles were as white as her teeth. It took a moment for Lauren to finally take a deep breath and speak. “We aren’t out yet. To anyone. Not even our parents. *Please* don’t tell anyone, Kate, I’m begging you.”

“No, never, I would *never* do that, I swear.”

“You have no idea how difficult it is,” Lauren said. She looked like she was going to start to cry. “It’s not fair.”

Beth stood up and hurried over to hold her as the tears began to fall. I thought I couldn’t feel any more guilty and then this happens.

“I know I can be a bitch,” Beth said while gently rubbing Lauren’s back, “but I’d do anything for her. I don’t care what anyone thinks of me, but we are *not* having a repeat of the situation with Grace. That was the single most fucked up thing and I will *never* let her get hurt the same way Grace did.”

Hearing that name again stung. Grace was a sweet girl. She had this punk rock demeanor that some people thought was grating and standoffish if she didn’t like you, but she was the kindest person in the school if she opened up to you. We weren’t friends, but we spoke a few times in the halls and the cafeteria and stuff. She got outed by Bruce White, one of the football players, who tried to date her last year. He asked her out during lunch and she rejected him. Then all of the shit with Homecoming went down, but he just kept going. She rejected him over and over and it came to a head when he tried to grope her at a party. She freaked out and threw a bottle at his head and gave him a major concussion, which ended up taking him off the team for weeks. It really hurt the team because he was a star player. They ended up getting kicked out of the playoffs in the first round without him and Charles to lead the team.

Then he found out she was gay.

She got bullied mercilessly by anyone those jock assholes could convince to do it. She had to get three new locker doors installed throughout the year because they kept getting defaced with slur after slur after slur. The basketball team stuck up for her to get back at the football team, but they couldn’t protect her forever. Her parents went to the school board and threatened to sue, but the rumor is political pressure from the Governor got it swept under the rug. Not even the local news would cover it. Nobody actually cared that some lesbian was being bullied at a

public school, least of all the Governor. Her parents were in the process of recruiting the ACLU to help, but any lawsuits would have bankrupted them.

Grace shot herself in April. She was only a few weeks away from graduating.

It really shook the school and hurt the reputation of the school and the basketball team. Most of all, though, it exposed how corrupt that place was. Even though the media didn't give a shit when she was alive, they milked her dead corpse for every penny they could. We got hounded by reporters every day for weeks. The police had to escort people in and out of the building for a while because they would just appear with these big cameras and shove them in our faces. Principal Patrick, the Principal before O'Reilly took over the job after years of being the disliked English teacher, was forced to resign. He still got a nice retirement package and apparently was working with the Governor's re-election campaign. He had pictures of the two of them golfing and hunting in his office. He was a walking piece of shit and I was glad he's gone.

I never thought I could be the catalyst for another Grace Carlisle situation. I hadn't even thought of her in months. It made me feel like I was going to puke.

Beth kissed Lauren on the top of the head. "It's gonna be okay," she whispered softly as she rubbed her back. She looked up at me. "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you earlier. I've been a bitch lately and I took it out on you. I don't want you to think you wouldn't be a good President because you would be. I think you're a very good person and you'd be great at the job. And don't think I'm just saying that because I can't think of another word or am pulling this out of my ass. You are *good*. Too good for this dump and these people." She looked down at Lauren, who was quietly sobbing into her hands. "I just wanted what I thought was best for her. I can be really heartless at times. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

I really wondered if Beth was the monster Tracy made her out to be. She loved Lauren. So much. How could someone blame her for wanting to help her out? I wasn't really mad at what she said back in the parking lot. She was just being protective and trying to scare off the competition. But what Tracy wants to do... the phone was as heavy as a thousand pound weight.

"That's not the only thing," I heard myself say. *No going back now. I need to do this.* "Tracy... also said some things. About you."

Beth looked at me curiously. "What'd she say?"

"She said you cornered her in a classroom and threatened her and said some horrible things to her." The words just came flowing out. The guilt was too much. I had to make this right.

She frowned. "Why would she do that?"

"I don't know, but I swear I never believed a word of it!"

Truth is, I didn't know whether she did or not. But with how much Tracy hated this poor girl, she might have been exaggerating to make me as angry as she was. I mean, just look at her. Beth was about as threatening as a housecat. What was Tracy's game here? Would she really have lied to me like that? I thought she was my friend...

"She... she never seemed like the type to spread rumors about people before," Lauren said without raising her head from where it was resting against Beth's collarbone. "At least when

I was around Spencer and Ashley, she was really quiet and never said much. Why would she say all of that? What did we ever do to her?"

"She's probably just jealous of you guys," Beth told her while she continued to rub her hair. "She's bitter that everyone loves you. She'd probably do whatever she could to hurt us. Whatever I said or did to make her hate me was wrong and I would try to make it right if she'd let me. But this is insane."

That sent me over the edge. I slowly raised the phone up and placed it on the desk. "She... she um... she also did something. Earlier."

Beth looked at the phone the same way I did when Tracy first showed it to me before, trying to make sense of why I was hiding it. I opened the Pictures folder and finally got a look at the shots Tracy had taken. I looked away the second I saw them.

Beth took a deep breath and looked directly into my eyes. "What's on the phone?"

"We saw you going to the locker room."

Lauren shot up in her seat, her eyes bugging out of her head. She stopped crying only because the shock caused her brain to overload as she tried to process what she had just heard. How could I have let this happen? This was just cruel.

"Did you follow us?" Beth asked, anger dripping from her tongue.

"It wasn't my idea!"

"No... no, no, no, no, no," Lauren said as she fidgeted around in her seat. "What are we going to do?! Oh fuck, oh fuck, why did we do that?!"

Beth took her hand in both of her own. "Hey, hey, it's okay," she assured her.

"How can you say that?!" Lauren yelled. "They *saw us*!"

"I didn't see anything, I *swear*! It was all Tracy!" Seeing Lauren cry was making me tear up now. I never thought I could make her hate me. She was always so good to me, ever since grade school.

"She's right," Beth said, holding Lauren's attention. "They were the only ones who saw anything and we already know that so we can get ahead of her if she tries anything. Fuck, Lauren, I'm so sorry for putting you in this situation."

Lauren took a few breaths to calm herself down, though it was clearly not working as well as she would have liked. "No... fuck... don't be sorry. I was there, too. It's both of our faults." She shook her head. "Never again. *Never* again."

"I tried talking her out of it the entire time," I said as I began to shake and cry. "She wouldn't listen to me, though. I'm sorry I ever let this happen. I'm such a horrible person."

"No." Beth looked at me over Lauren's head. "You came to us and wanted to stop her. We aren't mad at you." Her eyes said she was angry, but I could tell she was being sincere.

Lauren looked back at me, eyes wet and bloodshot. "Would you have come to us if we didn't find you here first?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead. I was hoping I could just trash the phone and destroy the evidence so no one would ever have to know, especially them. I might have gone to them later

and confessed what happened once I calmed down and disposed of the phone. It was a spur of the moment thing. Mostly to protect myself.

But the temptation was there to just go along with it and ruin their lives so I could get ahead. How else was I going to get into Harvard without taking every opportunity given to me? They didn't care about some Texas girl. They wanted the best of the best. What did I have to offer if I couldn't even win a student council election?

I am not a good person.

"Yes."

I lied.

"So that's the only phone with the pictures?" Beth asked. "Or did she send them out yet?"

"She went to get more phone numbers from Casey and Heather. She wants the football players so they will spread it around faster. And yeah, that's the only phone. I watched her delete the originals from her phone after she sent them to this one to avoid being caught."

"Wait, Casey and Heather are in on this, too?!" Lauren asked with horror.

"No! No! Tracy was going to say her phone broke and she got a new number so she could have an excuse to check their contacts and send them to herself," I explained. "She was making a list and... there."

I saw the list sitting facedown near the girls. I pointed at it and Beth took it. She read it over carefully, glancing back up at me from time to time. Beth thought things over for a moment. She set the list down in front of me and said something I never thought anyone would ever say.

"Alright. Send them. Go for it, I don't care."

Lauren stared at her, mortified. "Beth, what the fuck are you doing?"

"She can send them. Here." She slid the phone with the side of her hand over to me. While doing that, she dug through her jeans and took out her phone. "I'll even give you my contacts so you can have more numbers. Go on, take it."

I stared at the two phones, unsure of what to do. Was this a test?

"Beth, this isn't fucking funny," Lauren warned. "What are you doing?"

"But remember that when you do," she went on, ignoring her, "you're not just destroying our reputations and making us victims of bullying, you're also guilty of distributing child pornography."

The color drained from my face. Every hair on my body stood up on end at the sound of those two words. It couldn't be true, could it? No, of course not. Only old creeps can do that kinda thing. Tracy and I aren't that level of evil. Right?

"Child por...?" My voice was a squeak, a whisper.

"Lauren and I are both under eighteen. Did she even think about what would happen when she got caught? She might be covering her tracks, but it would have gotten back to her eventually. She'd end up in prison and I can assure you my mother would do everything to make sure she ended up under the jail."

Holy shit, she was right. What did I just do?

My heart began to beat faster and faster. “She... she said... it’s just a burner phone and-and we’d... never... oh fuck no-no-no I never—”

Beth reached over Lauren and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Thank you for being honest with us. And for trying to stop her. That does mean a lot.” She shook her head. “I mean, using a burner phone and a list of people’s phone numbers to spread naked photos of an underaged girl across the school...”

The way she said it made it sound like she was finally processing it for the first time, letting the reality of the situation get to her. The words were actually sinking in and she realized just how close her life came to being ruined. I don’t blame her. I almost ruined mine for some petty revenge over absolutely nothing. I know I wouldn’t be able to deal with that if it happened to me. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“It’s terrible.”

“I can’t believe she’d do that,” Lauren said with pure disdain. “It’s so... *immoral!*”

“Some people are just pure evil,” Beth said with regret. “No matter how nice they are, they’re just awful people. You can try to explain it with a sad childhood and pitiful backstory, but it was their choice to do what they did. I guess Tracy Summers is no exception.”

I spent some time listening to those true crime documentaries before. I want to become a lawyer so learning how the bad guys think is fascinating to me. This was an argument that was made many times. The “nature vs. nurture” debate on how a serial killer is formed. Was it society or their upbringing or their brains being hardwired toward a path of evil? I agreed with Beth. Something must have driven Tracy to this point, but I can’t imagine—

“Speaking of Tracy being pure evil,” Beth said, ending my train of thought. “Fuck, I really didn’t want to be the one to tell you this... but you should know she was never your friend to begin with.”

I didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“Since you’re being so honest with us, it’s only right that you know that Spencer and Frank told her to be your friend so she could spy on you and tell them anything they could use to beat you. They were afraid of you stealing their votes and wanted to use her to destroy you. Pass on secrets and find ways to beat you or embarrass you. Stuff like that.

“She told me herself the day she conveniently became your friend. Remember that conversation I had with her in the parking lot? She had to have told you about that. I confronted her because I knew what she was doing and tried to make her stop. I didn’t want you to get hurt. I guess she turned it around and said I was the bad guy. You’ve been so distant with me lately and I can only assume that’s why.

“I can’t help but blame myself for this in some way. I wanted to tell you sooner, but I knew you’d never believe me because she had her hooks in you. And after the way I behaved, I knew you’d never believe me. I’m sorry.”

I tried to find a way to deny it, to justify what happened. I tried so, so hard. Tracy was so good to me since she helped me in the hallway. We had been texting and talking nonstop for a week now. She was the closest friend I’d had in ages. I thought I was the luckiest person in the

world to have found someone who actually wanted to be my friend. And it was all a lie. She probably had a notebook full of our conversations so she could pass it off to Frank so they could point and laugh at me in those meetings. I'd been so open with her. She even knew about my stupid crush on Spencer...

That no good, two-faced bitch was using me this whole time... No. No, there's no way.

"What? No, no, she—"

"Unfortunately, it's true," Beth confirmed. She bitterly laughed and brushed some hairs out of her eyes. "It's kinda funny. If this didn't happen, she'd still be using you and you'd have no idea and you'd have been strung along for nothing."

"What a bunch of bullshit," Lauren spat. "I'll never look at them the same way again. Some of those people are my *friends*. Assholes."

"I'm so sorry you had to find out this way," Beth said in a useless attempt to console me. "Or just go through it in general. You don't deserve this."

"No. No, don't be sorry. I just have a shit taste in friends."

"Can I do *anything* to help?" Lauren pleaded. "You didn't do anything wrong and I feel so bad you got involved with this."

"There's nothing you can do," I said quietly. "She used me. They won."

"Do you wanna get to know some of the volleyball girls?" Lauren offered. "They're all really good people and I know they'd love to be your friend! I could introduce you to them after the meeting if you'd like."

"That would be really nice," I admitted. "But not right now. I need some alone time. I'd be really shit company if I tried to talk to them today." I knew what I had to do. "I'm going to talk to Mr. Hardy tomorrow and tell him I'm dropping out. I'm never going to win and I just want this to be over."

I never used to swear as much as before this conversation. Now I was cussing left and right. Tracy was a vile person and she absolutely destroyed me. Who cares about something as petty as swearing when she almost got me sent to prison?

"I have a better idea."

I turned back to Beth to see what she had to say.

"When I talked to you earlier, I was trying to convince you to drop out of the race. I was an ass about it and I regret it. And after what happened with Tracy... look, being nicer to people is something I'm trying to work on, especially someone as valuable as you are." She cleared her throat. "Lauren is going to be President. I'd bet my life on that. And when she does win, she will need a Cabinet full of good people. I think I speak for Lauren when I say we'd be more than grateful if you'd help her run the school as a member of that group."

"That's a great idea!" Lauren said, smiling for the first time since she walked in the room. Her cheeks were still stained with tears. That smile broke my heart. "Kate, I'd love you forever if you wanted to work with us."

Beth smiled at me as well. "What do you say?"

It was hard to admit I lost. It sucked.

Even though I knew I would never win, part of me got my hopes up for just sticking my neck out and trying. It was a weakness of mine: trying and getting hurt when it blows up in my face. I had to force myself to not let my stupid little crush on Spencer develop into anything more because I knew I had no shot there and after this whole thing with Tracy, I don't think I ever want to see him again. I didn't try out for any sports teams because I'm not exactly athletically gifted.

Putting myself out there to become Student Body President was one of the only times in my life I actually tried and, as expected, it left me empty and alone. But now I was being made an offer by two of the most considerate people in the whole school that would get me *something* to put on my transcript and not be forced into the spotlight.

Thinking of how Spencer had played a role in Tracy betraying me hurt the most. It made my decision so much easier. I reached over to shake Beth's hand. "I'm in."

Lauren cheered with joy. "Ah, I'm so excited!"

She leaned in to hug me. She squeezed me tight and I squeezed back. It was such a relief to know they didn't utterly despise me for my role in what happened. And, best of all, I think I just made some new friends. Real friends. Friends who aren't using me.

Beth reached over to grab the burner phone. "And I think we can agree we don't need this hanging around anymore." She took it in both hands and snapped it in two.

I couldn't believe that Tracy had lied so much about Beth. She might be very intense, but I can tell it was only because she cared. Not just about Lauren, but about me. I felt like I was the third member in a secret club. The third wheel in a potentially amazing friendship.

Things were looking bright.

Tracy

Time stood still as I watched from the hallway, the doorframe shielding me from prying eyes. I knew it was over when I saw them with Kate. They got to her first.

For a second, a tiny, brief little second, Beth looked up and locked eyes with me. Her eyes sparkled with recognition and a grin spread across her face. A victorious grin. A malicious grin. She snapped the phone in half and dropped the remains on the desk in front of her. After she was done, she motioned for Lauren and Kate to embrace her and they all laughed with a happiness and sense of belonging I'd never felt in my entire life.

I had nothing.

I knew I just lost Kate. She'd never trust me again as long as I lived. I couldn't say I blamed her. Our relationship was built on a lie. I should never have agreed to it. I took a gamble and I lost. Frank wouldn't feel sympathy for me. I managed to screw up being someone's only friend. How could they ever see me as anything more than a walking cheatsheet? I deserved this.

I should have just taken the phone with me. She wouldn't have confessed without it. I could deny it until the Sun went dark and they'd have nothing except Kate's word to prove it even existed. Only the three of us knew the phone ever existed and *he* would never snitch.

Now it was in pieces.

How could I let myself turn into Beth? I can't even say I let power get to my head because I had no real power to begin with. I tasted revenge for a moment and let it consume me. I was a malignant tumor. I destroyed everything around me I touched in a vain effort to get ahead in life. Someone upsets me and I nearly ruined two lives to make myself feel better.

I turned and walked away. There was nothing left to do. It was over.

Beth

I won.

REPERCUSSIONS

Spencer

My day with Ashley went amazingly. It was exactly what I needed. For a few hours, I really felt like I rediscovered my love for living. Nothing happened and Ashley and I made it very clear to each other that we were only ever going to be friends from that moment forward. Though it would be a while before I would completely lose my feelings for her, if I ever did, I would have to learn to live with this. I wasn't angry or jealous. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make for someone I wanted to stay in my life.

As much as I loved the guys on the team and treated them like they were my own brothers, sometimes it felt like they were my coworkers. People I was close with by circumstance. We sweated together, bled together, cried together, cheered together. We drank on the weekends and talked about the girls we fucked and that apparently made us brothers.

But that didn't make us close.

Frank was the closest friend I had on the team, maybe even in the world, but even he was getting on my nerves lately. I felt a boatload of regret for what he asked Tracy to do with Katherine. Why I let things get this bad with this stupid election, I don't know. I really lost control of myself for a while there and our friendship was suffering as a result.

I was busy getting in the workout I had missed the previous day. During my study hall, I was called in to meet with Coach Mullens. He served as the school's Athletic Director so he was on-site for most of the day, balancing coaching our football team with contacting college programs for all the sports our school offered so all the athletes could make a push for scholarships they desperately needed. College is expensive and playing sports in college makes it even harder if you don't get a full ride.

He sat me down and read me the riot act. I did my best to keep a straight face.

"Do you not want to play football anymore, son?" he asked me point-blank in his heavy Texan accent that I thankfully did not pick up during my life. "Are you quittin' the team? If you are, just let me know now so I can take you off the roster for this Friday and dress someone else to take your spot."

I had a pretty decent relationship with Coach Mullens. I thought so, at least.

He served as the head coach of the team for fifteen years now. He turned down multiple offers to make the jump to college ball so he could stay with the program. He wasn't in it for the money. Despite making a sizable paycheck every year as both Coach and Athletic Director, he would make five times that amount if he had taken the jobs offered to him over the years. The head coach of a college football team is usually the highest paid public employees in the states they work in. This can come out to something like ten times what the average teacher makes.

But as it turns out, he didn't care about money at all. He apparently wanted to coach long enough to coach his grandson, David, who would be enrolling during my Senior year. He was being called the second coming of Archie Manning by state media despite only being thirteen. A real superstar in the making.

We had similar backgrounds in that regard. Coach asked me over the summer if I would be interested in mentoring little David since he was gunning for my job after I graduated. It felt weird to be asked to do the job Charles had done for me only a year before. I felt old. Coach swore up and down that my job wouldn't be in jeopardy when David got here. He was only a Freshman so he'd have to be *really* damn good to beat me out for the job.

To be honest, I really didn't care if he started over me or not that Friday night. I'd sit down with him right now and show him film if it meant he would take my spot on the roster and I could get some rest.

"I love the team, Coach," I said with sincerity. "I'm just going through some stuff right now and needed to spend some time with myself."

"Well why didn't you come to me and talk about it?" he asked, finally calming himself down and speaking to me the way he always did. When we talked one-on-one, he spoke to me like I was his favorite nephew, or maybe even his own son. His voice sounded very hoarse. I figured he was screaming a lot yesterday over my absence.

"I had to figure it out on my own."

He shook his head. "You know I can't let you play, right? You missed two practices and were late for another. It would be bad for the team if you got a free pass. *Especially* since you're the captain."

"I understand."

He didn't, though. I could see it in his eyes. Even though I treated him like he was my favorite uncle, I wasn't out to impress him or make him care about my personal life. If he wanted to help, fine. If not, fine.

He looked down at my hand and pointed at the bandages. "You okay?"

I rubbed my knuckle absentmindedly. It stung. "I fell."

"Spencer," he said, softly. "What's going on? Talk to me. You're a good kid. Is this some kinda teenage acting out thing?"

"No, it's..." I sighed. "I just needed a break."

"From football?"

"From *everything*. I'm burnt out."

"Do you want to quit?"

It was the question I was dreading needing to answer. The thought had crossed my mind a lot lately. Having more time to myself was an extremely attractive thought. My favorite part of the season after my Sophomore year was when it was over and I could finally have some afternoons to myself. I could play video games and text cute girls and just be normal again. No media circuses or hour-long game film sessions in my dad's screening room. I could relax.

Unfortunately, things were different now that I was a Junior. I had to start worrying about SATs and Junior year is notorious at Arlington for being the toughest year of school academics-wise. It beats wasting away in the heat for hours and hours every week, I guess.

The real downside to quitting the team would be losing potential scholarships to schools and being indebted to student loan companies for the rest of my life. My dad could cut me off

whenever he wanted after I turned eighteen and I'd be fucked for life. At the end of the day, I needed football more than it needed me.

"No. I don't want to hurt the team. Or you. But I had to put myself first sometimes."

"I get it," he said. "I just wish you would have talked to me beforehand. You can take a practice off if there's something wrong. I just wished you'd come to me first."

"I'm sorry."

I had nothing else to say. The bell rang and cut our meeting short. For once, I was very grateful to be sent to Spanish class. I didn't want to talk to him about myself anymore. It was very uncomfortable to try to open up to adults about these kinds of things. Even if my dad would let me go to therapy again, I'd be a stone wall in there. It didn't work last time and there was no guarantee it'd work this time around either.

As punishment for missing multiple practices and for being a generally shit leader, we agreed I would be doing extra workouts while I waited out my suspension. I was going to hit the weight room a half-hour early and I'd be running hills and suicides before and after practice in front of everyone. As much as it only reinforced why I wanted to quit, I took my punishment like a man and didn't protest once. I wouldn't give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me cry or cuss or lose my temper.

Everyone stood around and watched me work so hard I ended up puking on the sidelines. Twice. They offered me no water. They were told to stay silent and see what happens when one of their own quits on the team. What happens when one of their leaders quits on their brothers. I could tell they weren't happy with me. I couldn't blame them. I couldn't blame my coaches for making me do this either.

When Frank approached me in the weight room the next day, he was very open with his frustration with me. He'd been watching me doing pushups for about five minutes. I ignored him and focused on the exercise. Part of me used him being there as hate-filled motivation to work harder. I eventually felt my arms give out and I collapsed onto the floor, completely gassed.

"Only two more and you'd set the record."

I gave him the finger while sucking down air. He entered the room and sat on a bench beside me. I sat up and rested on my knees. There wasn't enough air in the world to help me catch my breath again.

"Having fun?"

"Coach says I gotta make up for missing practice," I explained. He knew this already. I just felt the need to justify why I was working myself to death alone.

"Where were you, man?" he asked. "Why'd you ditch us?"

"I didn't *ditch* you," I countered. "I needed a day off."

"You *ditched* us, man, don't bullshit me," he said.

"Did you need something?" I was getting tired of this. I still had an entire workout I was expected to do before we had our Thursday walkthrough. It was a lighter practice, shoulder pads only, but it was still important because we went over the entire game plan for the game the next day. Even though I was benched, I still had to be there and I wanted to rest up a little beforehand.

"I know you don't wanna let us down. And you know we need you."

"I know."

It seemed like the only thing people told me anymore. *We need you*. As if I didn't have enough pressure on my hands already with Ashley and Lauren and Tracy and the election and him and Megan and school and SATs and college and looking for a job. Add in being constantly reminded that people's lives basically rested on my shoulders and it only made things so much easier for me. If I fucked up, people could lose out on scholarships. One bad game that makes everyone else look bad and scouts could lose interest in people. Who cares about the players team that goes 1-9? Their futures could be ruined if I didn't suck it up and work.

"How's Ashley?" Frank asked calmly.

"How should I know?" I asked with a glare. "We broke up. Remember?"

He scoffed. "You really think I don't know where you were?" he asked "What else would make you miss practice? So how is she?"

I rolled my eyes and drank some water when he offered me my bottle. "She's doing better. She needed some alone time, too."

"Okay."

He stood and walked out of the room. I went back to my workout as if nothing happened.

If I would have known how bad things would get when I got home from practice, I would have spent the night on Ashley's couch.

I could barely walk. I got worked to death before and after practice again as punishment and I wanted nothing more than to relax. I had a study hall first period so I could just show up and do my homework then. In the meantime, I could collapse on the couch and pass out while the TV lulled me to sleep.

The front door swung open and crashed into the wall. I was fast asleep when it happened and the loud bang woke me right up. I was in a daze, my foggy brain trying to make sense of what had happened. I looked frantically around the room and saw a figure storming toward me from the hallway. The sunlight outside blinded me.

"Who do you think you are?" the figure calmly asked. Despite being half-asleep, I could tell they were suppressing indescribable rage.

"What?"

I genuinely wasn't sure what he had just said. I was still processing everything going on. I blinked and saw the man pick up a vase and hurl it at my head. I ducked at the last second and it crashed into the wall behind me. That woke me right up.

"Don't *what* me, you little shit! Where were you yesterday?!"

I can't believe I couldn't recognize the voice right off the bat. No one else but my dear father had that level of anger inside of them. I forced myself to wake up to prepare myself for whatever was coming next. All I could think to do was run. He was faster and cut me off as I inched closer toward the back door, my one chance at escaping what was coming.

"I was with Ashley," I admitted. "She needed me."

“Oh, I’m sure she did.” He spat on the floor. “Stupid bitch needs to shut the fuck up and learn her fuckin’ place.”

“Don’t talk about her like that,” I warned him. I was tired and scared, but I’d never let anyone treat her like that again. Not if I could help it.

His arm shot out as fast as a bullet. The back of his hand connected with my right cheek and sent me spinning backwards. I could feel my lip split and blood began to fill my mouth. By now I was fully awake, but the shock of being hit in the face dazed me again. I crashed back into the wall and had to force my legs to stay up. He can hit like a truck.

“You keep your mouth shut until I say you can speak, too!” he barked. “How do you think I feel getting a call from your coach saying you didn’t show up to practice and nobody can find you? Huh?! Do you think I like hearing that when I’m trying to enjoy my day off? Do you think I like wondering if you’re dead?!”

I wiped the blood from my lip. More quickly filled its place and poured down my chin. Despite the pain, I stared him down. “Like I give a shit how you feel.”

Without hesitation, he stepped forward and punched me in the stomach as hard as he could. All the wind was knocked right out of me. I ended up spraying a mouthful of blood into his face. As I collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath, I got the smallest amount of enjoyment seeing him frantically wipe the red out of his eyes and spit my own blood out of his mouth between cuss after cuss.

My heart sank when I heard the patter of tiny feet on the steps echoing through the hallway. When I looked back towards the sound, Megan stared at us in absolute horror. “What’s going on?!”

I tried to wave for her to leave. Just lifting my arm made my stomach do circles. I felt like I was going to vomit.

My dad finally cleared his eyes enough to look up at her. His face was still drenched in spit and blood. He looked like a horror movie villain. “Go to your room. *NOW!*”

Megan did as she was told. *Thank God.* She sprinted back up the stairs. Even though I was terrified of being alone with him, I did not want her to see this. She had enough problems. I didn’t want to be responsible for any more.

He reached down and grabbed me by my shirt, yanking me to my feet. I was still struggling to breathe and my legs couldn’t function right. I almost fell, but he made damn sure I was back on my feet. He looked me right in the eyes and made sure I got the message.

“You listen and you listen good. If I *ever* hear you skipped practice because you wanted to screw your little girlfriend or for any other bullshit reason besides you getting run over by a motherfuckin’ bus, you’re out on the street. You are not throwing your life away for some cheerleader slut. *Got it?*”

I had nothing to say so he just kept going.

“I’m trying to get you ready for the real world and the real world will do much fuckin’ worse than this. I’m trying to get you into UT so you can become a millionaire one day and you’ll never have to work a day in your life. Are you really this ungrateful for all I do for you?”

After all the football camps and practices and free games? The twenty thousand dollar truck? All the time *I* wasted on you and this is how you repay me? No. Absolutely motherfucking *not*. I worked too hard to get you here. I'm not gonna let you throw it away so you can fuck your girlfriend. Never. Again. Do you understand?"

I coughed. Blood trickled down my chin and dripped onto my socks. "Yeah."

For good measure, he gave me a shove back into the wall. I collapsed back onto the floor. All the strength in me had evaporated. I wanted to just crawl up and die.

"Now go to your room and get out of my sight."

He sat down right where I was sleeping and began to watch TV as though nothing had ever happened. From the look on his face, I think he might have forgotten anything had even happened. He even stopped trying to clean his face off. My blood stained his stubble and was beginning to dry on his nose.

I forced myself back to my feet and trudged up the stairs. Every step was agony. By the time I reached the top, I was out of breath again. I wouldn't be shocked if he broke a rib or two. I clenched my stomach with one hand and leaned heavily on the railing for support. When I reached the top, I had to lean against the wall and take slow, methodical steps, every breath more painful and laborious as the one before. The fight, combined with the intense two days of practice, had sapped me of any energy I had left.

Megan was waiting for me in her doorway. I motioned for her to go inside and I followed. Summoning anything I had left in me to not look weak in front of her, I stood up straight and followed her in. We sat down on her bed. It was so relieving to sit down for a second. I exhaled sharply as I felt a jolt of electricity in my gut.

"If he ever gets worse than that with you," I told her sternly with my quarterback voice, "you lock yourself somewhere safe and call the police. Don't call me, *call them*. They'll help."

She nodded. She was crying. I held her and we cried together. I think some of my blood got into her hair. I felt bad. She had pretty hair.

That was the moment I decided what I wanted to do with my life.

No matter what the outcome was, I didn't regret skipping practice for Ashley. She needed me. But now, more than ever, I needed to do what was best for *me*. I decided that I would keep playing and with every hit, with every down, with every wasted minute watching film, with every rep in the gym and on the field, I would be playing with one source of inspiration in mind: spite for my douchebag father.

I would become the greatest quarterback who ever lived so I could shove my success down that deadbeat's throat and when he was old and gray and dying of alcoholism or liver cancer or whateverthefuck was else wrong with him and he needed me more than he's ever needed me before in his entire pathetic life, I could remind him of every time he hit me or threatened Meg or left us for days on end to go binge drinking and gambling up in Vegas on his little "business trips" where he cheated on Mom when she was sick. And I'd leave him to die.

I would be on top of the world and he would never be able to hurt me again.

I would do whatever it took to never be weak again.

Beth

No one could have predicted the events of the previous week, least of all myself. In the span of a few days, we went from being a very strong second contender for the election to being the presumptive frontrunner. A few bad decisions by the other major players led to us having a comfortable lead. And, by sheer coincidence, none of it through any fault of my own.

Spencer's actions were extremely admirable. Even I would not criticize him for his choices from an entirely moralistic standpoint. He was being a good guy and it was admirable. Logically, however, his choices were horrifically stupid and short-sighted. He abandoned his teammates for an afternoon with Ashley, a fact that I learned from Lauren's friendship with Casey and Heather and proceeded to share with anyone that would listen to continue to ruin his reputation, *and* he got himself suspended for the next game. Austin Preparatory Academy was one of the toughest schools in the conference. I weep for our athletic department.

With Spencer suspended, his backups will get the chance. Jamar Watford and Justin Elliott, two boys who would never be given this shot without Spencer's untimely retirement or equally untimely death, would be given the go-ahead to lead the team in their captain's absence. I heard the same rumors as everyone else about Coach Mullens' wunderkind grandson who was supposedly the next big quarterback after Spencer graduates. Thank God I would be long gone from this shithole by then and wouldn't have to experience another smug jock running things.

Because of his fuckup and Tracy's stupidity, Katherine Duvall was now firmly in our camp. Tracy's zealous ambition was her undoing. I cannot say I can criticize her reasoning for wanting to eliminate me. I was nothing but a shallow, soulless bitch to her. Looking back, I regret my actions. I should have gotten closer with her to manipulate her better into serving my needs as a friend rather than a superior. My ego got the better of me. As pleasurable as it was to put that little cockroach in her place, a subservient friend is always better than a bitter lackey.

What's funniest of all was me and Lauren didn't even take our clothes off. All that talk about *child pornography* was a total bluff. I knew she didn't have the balls to actually look at the pictures and even if she did, I would've just played up how scummy forcibly outing us would be.

That plan with the phone was some clever scheming on Tracy's part. It really would have sunk us if she'd gotten to Lauren first. Though the plan itself was fundamentally flawed. I analyzed every aspect of it following our meeting with Katherine to judge its merits and viability. Tracy's fatal flaw was trusting Katherine, a morally sturdy individual who would never stoop so low to do what she was proposing.

To put it bluntly, Katherine Duvall is too nice for those kinds of schemes. She might have hated me for a day, but her anger was not nearly strong enough to commit a felony. On top of that, leaving the phone with a near-stranger while seeking out more numbers to send the picture to was stupid. What kind of idiot leaves their trump card in someone else's hands? In addition, she exposed herself as the one collecting the numbers. Any two-bit cop could figure out the pattern here and realize her involvement if Casey and Heather got grilled by the administration. Anyone who wants to enact this scheme would have to act alone, have the numbers days in advance to avoid suspicion, and be able to distribute them at the same time without being caught.

Like I said, I spent a lot of time considering this.

Monday was our judgment day. First was the big debate between Spencer and Lauren and the election itself would follow shortly afterward. We only had to not screw up for three more days and we would be golden. This was the beginning of the future we deserved. I could feel it.

In the meantime, Lauren, Katherine, and I spent the afternoon together. It seemed only right that our new prized dog be given a spot on the couch while we enjoyed ourselves. Katherine was very easy to talk to, all things considered. I could tell right away she does not get out much. It explains why she would allow her guard to sink so low that she would immediately trust the likes of Tracy Summers, a girl who barely spoke to her throughout their time in school together.

“Do we really have to go to this game tomorrow night?” I complained. It was meant to be petty and humorous banter, but I genuinely did not want to watch another football game for as long as I lived.

“Oh, come on,” Lauren said, “it’ll be fun. Stop crying.”

“It’s supposed to be a very good game,” Katherine chimed in.

“At least it’ll be a nice day out,” I grumbled. Perfect sunburn weather.

“Hey, speaking of football,” Katherine continued. “Do you know when Homecoming is this year?”

Lauren grinned. “Why? Do you have a date?”

Katherine blushed a little. “Ha, *nooo*. I just need to know because I told my mom I was going, but I’m probably gonna skip and go see a movie or something.”

“October 17th,” I recited. I memorized the date religiously. Knowing the dates of the major extracurricular activities was paramount to being a good leader. Plus it was the next time I was guaranteed to have a whole night alone with Lauren. I was already craving it since our previous romantic encounter left us both rather empty. I wondered if Tracy enjoyed the show.

“Kinda early, isn’t it?” Katherine asked.

“Maybe,” I replied without thinking of a better response to such a meaningless question. “And the election is on Monday.”

Lauren sighed. “Do you guys really still think I can win?”

“Oh no,” I said, slightly annoyed. “No, no, absolutely not, no, we are *not* having this conversation again.”

“Trust me, you’re gonna win,” Katherine enthusiastically added. “It won’t even be close.”

“I’m so nervous,” Lauren admitted. “I mean, I’m going to be running an entire school.”

I rolled my eyes slightly. She’d be running food drives and organizing dances. Not paying the electric bill or suspending the burnouts for smoking up in the boiler room. I loved her, but she overreacted to everything. Much as I wanted us to win, it would not set us back too far if we somehow lost. It would hurt, sure, but it would not *completely* derail my plans.

Katherine, to her credit, had been taking the loss fairly well. She had no reason to trust us, especially after the last friend she made turned out to be a greasy little rat working for Frank and Spencer. I reasoned it was a mixture of her desperation for friends mixed with her absolute

need to have another notch on her college application, President or otherwise. I really did not mind her joining our little circle. She was very receptive of our special relationship and seemed to be extremely accepting of our reasoning why we refused to come out to our friends and families. Plus she was always nice to me and Grace said a few kind things about her.

Her support of us being a couple was very apparent when I looked at Lauren with a warm smile and said, “And I’ll be there every step of the way.”

Lauren smiled back and instantly reached out to hold my hand.

Katherine, the little flower she is, was absolutely beaming at the sight of our true love. “You two are adorable,” she gushed.

She’s right. We are adorable. We’re also the hottest couple in the school and people would pay top dollar to see those pictures of us. We deserved to be Homecoming Queen together.

“I still can’t believe we came out to you,” Lauren said with a nervous chuckle.

“Do you regret it?”

“No, I’m just...” Lauren struggled to find the words. “Like I said before, I’m not... *we’re* not... out. To anyone. It’s weird. I don’t know how to explain it. My Dad doesn’t even know. And same with Beth, her Mom has no idea.”

“She’s usually off on business,” I explained. “We rarely talk.”

Some may point to my lack of a dedicated parental figure as the reasoning for why I am the way I am. That is fundamentally untrue and I could cite numerous sources in a peer-reviewed essay as to what molded me into the young woman I am today. I am not the bad guy. Nature vs. Nurture was an extremely one-sided war in the development of my psyche. I merely reacted to stimuli in my environment and acted as I deemed fit according to the situation. It was all their fault anyway. *They* drove me to be like this. I will never forgive them and no one could expect me to if they knew the truth.

“I get it,” Katherine said before immediately backtracking. “I mean, I don’t, but you know. Right? Please?”

Lauren laughed, prompting me to snap out of my haze and chuckle as well.

“Alright, enough of the sappy emotional stuff,” I announced. “Let’s plan out Monday.”

“What do you mean?” Katherine asked.

“We have three days until the election,” I explained. “We need something big to get people’s attention. Plus there is the debate before the voting and that could make or break the campaign. Spencer is a natural leader so you’re going to have to be great. No pressure! But we have all weekend to worry about that so no sense getting worked up yet. But we should do something big for Monday. Something that gets people talking.”

We thought it over for a moment before Lauren smiled and happily announced, “We could steal a blimp!”

“Great idea,” I said, supportively. “Not what I had in mind and maybe not good for the group as a whole, but we’ll put it in the *Consider* pile.” Lauren snapped her fingers and shrugged, all while smirking at me and Katherine. Sometimes it was hard not to love her.

“Here’s what I was thinking.”

POLITICS

Ashley

It was another night where I felt as though I felt I would have been better off not going to sleep rather than actually sleeping. Nightmares came and went, waking me up every hour. I couldn't stop dreaming about Spencer's party. I wished I could remember why it hurt me so badly, besides the blowup with Spencer.

I walked into the kitchen as soon as I woke up. It was only 5:47 in the morning so I got the entire day to myself. I needed something to drink. While getting my morning glass of ice water, I was greeted by a note on the refrigerator door, written by my mother.

Morning, sweetie!

Have to see the lawyer so I left early. Breakfast in the fridge, money on the counter for lunch/dinner if I don't get back in time to bring something home. If you're still feeling sick, text me so I can get a doctor's note for Monday. It's really no trouble. Don't call because I might not be able to pick up. Love you!

Mom.

To her credit, mom had been taking things pretty well. She'd been so supportive and tried her best to cheer me up. We got to hang out for the first time in weeks the day after I came home. She called off work to do it and everything. I don't think she understood exactly what happened or why I ran away, but she's done her best with what she has been able to comprehend. I just wish she could be home more often.

I was taking the pre-made waffles out of the freezer when I heard my phone ring back on the granite island. I loved that little island. It made me feel special and rich even though basically anyone could get one in their house. Not really feeling like talking, I let it go to voicemail while I heated up my food. While it was spinning around in the microwave, I checked to see who called.

It was Lauren.

I still don't know if I regretted my decision to skip the call. I think planning out what I was going to say rather than speak in the moment was the right call. I let the voicemail play on speaker and listened intently.

"Hey, Ash, it's me. I hope things are alright. So um... look, I need to talk to you about something. Important. If you can, please meet me at school or at my house or whatever works for you. Or call me. I just need to be sure you're okay. I miss you. Everyone does. Please call me back whenever you can. Bye."

I quickly hit save so the message would remain on my phone. I wasn't going to forget she called. The last time we spoke was in the bathroom and I said some awful things to her. I wished I could take that day back so bad.

Something about that morning was different. Waking up, I felt like a different person. I felt more energetic and full of life. Like someone could walk up to me and slap me in the face

and I would just smile and blow them a kiss. It was a weird feeling, but it felt good. Thinking of showing it to everyone that I was perfectly okay only added to my jubilation. Especially Lauren. Even if she cared, she waited all week to show it and then only called as she was leaving for school. She could have called at any time and she chose now?

I decided I was going to confront her face-to-face. But I couldn't bring myself to wait until the next week to do so. She was going to be at school that day so I decided I would meet her there. Despite normally having a two-hour or longer morning routine, I condensed it to be able to make it to school before the first bell rang at 7:40. I went all out in what little time I had. I shampooed and conditioned my hair. I put on my cherry-red lipstick that made my eyes pop. A little blush and mascara never hurt either.

I was in the car by 7:10 and pulling into the school by 7:27.

Sitting in my car, the anxiety of returning really began to hit me. Not only had no one been informed of my return, I was bound to be the talk of the school. I wasn't sure I could handle that level of stress after everything that happened. I remember back in eighth grade when I had a bout of stomach flu that knocked me out of school for a week. I ended up losing over twenty pounds. When I returned the next Monday, the first thing someone said to me while we waited in our homeroom for classes to start wasn't something encouraging or supportive to signal that everyone was glad to see I was okay.

"We thought you were dead."

Unlike last time, I actually could have died from the stupid stunt I pulled.

But much like when I was forced to return to school after my illness, I knew I would have to return to school eventually after my little sabbatical. I figured I could just rip the bandage off nice and quick and have the weekend to recover before really getting back into it on Monday. Plus it would be nice to see Spencer again. It hurt that nobody besides him, Casey, and Heather reached out to me over my time off, but I pushed that to the back of my mind.

They'd remember my name soon enough.

The election also was swirling in my mind. I didn't know where I stood with Lauren so I needed to keep Spencer in office. Plus I needed the boost to my ego after a week of being kicked in the metaphorical balls over and over again. If Spencer won and Frank took VP, I'd have Secretary locked down and an added bonus to the college applications I really needed to get to work on sometime after SATs. First we'd need to beat Lauren and Beth, obviously, but it wasn't out of the question.

I donned my best pair of sunglasses and exited the car.

I could tell that everyone was staring as soon as I crossed the parking lot. People were stopping to give a second glance as far away as the front doors just to see if it was really me. The pit in my stomach was growing even larger, but it felt so good to be in the spotlight again. To have people talking about you and wanting to be you. By the time I reached the front doors, I had been stopped by no less than fourteen people just trying to say hi.

Ashley Williams is back, motherfuckers.

Word traveled like wildfire of my unannounced return. Everyone from the lowliest of nerds to the Principal himself came out in force to meet me, to get one look of the missing girl returned from certain death. Casey and Heather arrived late and didn't get the memo until well after the hype had died down. They greeted me in the hallway and took their place at my side.

Spencer stared at me in shock when he laid eyes on me. Of all the people who heard about my early comeback, I thought he would have been the first to visit me. Instead, he was finding out like everyone else. I wondered how he got the massive bruise on his face. Must have been a freak accident during practice or something.

"Morning, Spencer," I said with a smile.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm going to school, dummy," I said, playfully rolling my eyes. "What's it look like?"

"I thought you weren't back till Monday?"

A freshman boy walked by, staring at me with all the awkwardness of a fourteen year old with his first mustache hair that he really should shave. I waved at him. He nearly fainted.

"I needed to come back sometime," I replied. "Why wait?"

"Oh... well, good. I mean, I'm glad. Really. Glad you're back."

"I'm okay, Spencer," I assured him. "I promise."

A crowd was now forming. I knew what they wanted to see. The wayward princess and the prince of the school together again. If there was ever a chance to win the election for Spencer after a week of letting people down, this was it. I didn't even bother thinking twice. I took him by the shirt collar and pulled him in for a kiss. It was deep and it was passionate and it drew shocked gasps from some of the onlookers. I made sure they got their money's worth before pulling away.

I stared into his eyes, smiling. "If you need blush for that little boo boo, I have some in my locker. Come say hi sometime."

I winked and walked away. Casey and Heather, despite their confusion, hurried after me. I could not suppress the grin forming on my face. God, it felt good to be back in the zone.

"Wow," Casey exclaimed. "I was not expecting that."

"So wait, are you and him back together or what is going on?" Heather asked.

"We'll see," I said with a sly smile. "We'll see."

Our first class wasn't going to begin for another ten minutes so I went to my locker to freshen up and prepare for the day. The girls broke off to go talk to some of their friends, leaving me to have personal time. Michelle, who hadn't been out to meet me since I came back, approached me. It stung that she didn't reach out when I was gone so I wasn't exactly happy to see her. Still, I smiled and held her hands and played the former best friend.

"I can't believe you're back!" She was delighted to see me. I wondered if she even missed me to begin with.

"I know! I cut my vacation a couple days short just to see the look on people's faces."

"You're insane," she said with a laugh. "I would have taken the extra three days off."

"And miss the game tonight? As if."

I wish Michelle and I hadn't drifted apart. Even though I was mad at her, I missed hanging out. She didn't even know why Lauren and I stopped hanging out. She was the first person I considered coming out to around here when we were so close. That ship sailed, though. I know she liked Lauren more and chose to stick by her side after things went down. Following our breakup, our inner circle of friends chose their sides without knowing the full context. Lauren only ended up with Michelle while I kept Casey, Heather, Spencer, and Frank. Lauren did end up getting Beth after I was out of the picture, though. It balanced itself out. Sort of.

"Are you going?"

"I won't be able to cheer since I missed the whole week," I explained, "but that doesn't mean I can't watch from the stands. I'll just hang out and wait for the afterparty."

Thinking of another party made me sick.

Michelle hugged me again and excused herself, leaving me to continue re-applying my makeup. I only had a few seconds before I felt someone wrap themselves around my waist. I jumped, but the smell of vanilla dulled my senses and helped me relax. I bought her a vanilla-scented body wash when we were dating and now she swore by it, even after we broke up. I wanted to turn around and kiss her, but I knew that was a bit much.

"I missed you so much," Lauren said into my shoulder. She sounded like she was about to cry. It made me sad to hear her voice, but I kept a positive demeanor.

"Oh, hey, Laurie! How's it going? I forgot how tight your hugs are."

Lauren pulled away, giving me a chance to turn around. There were two people waiting a few feet behind Lauren. I immediately locked eyes with Beth. I thought she would have been more pissed that I was hugging her girlfriend, but she seemed rather content with what was going on. I nodded to her.

Kate was also there. I smiled and waved to her. "Hi, Kate." She only waved in response while wearing a strangely concerned look on her face.

"I'm fine," Lauren said, "but what's up with you? Are you okay?"

"Never better! Why?"

"I didn't think you'd be back today."

"You need to be in school the day of a game to be allowed to the game," I explained to her as I did earlier with Michelle. "I'm not cheering or anything, but I want to be there for Spencer."

"Oh. Are you guys like..."

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "But we'll figure things out. Hopefully before Monday."

Lauren got the hint. She winced a little at the mention of the election. I wondered if I was hurting her the same way she hurt me. The concept felt... good... terrible, but good. Like I wasn't the bad guy here and she wasn't the perfect victim with her long blonde hair and generally sad disposition. I know I'm hot, but she's beautiful. She gets more points for that as well. The sad little rich girl who has everything she wants, but doesn't have what she needs.

I dropped my voice to a whisper. “Asking your little girlfriend to stop giving me a death stare every time she sees me would be nice. Don’t look, she’s actually being nice for once and not telling me to kill myself without actually saying it. Did you pay her to be sweeter to me?”

Lauren had nothing to say. I shrugged and went back to my makeup.

“I really think we should talk later,” she hesitantly said, as if the words hurt her to say.

“Meet me in the chem lab later and tell me what you wanted over the phone. Cool?”

She nodded as the bell rang. I avoided her gaze. I didn’t want to cry either.

“Great.”

I closed my locker and walked away, leaving my dearest friends in the dust.

The final well-wishers on my big return concert were none other than my favorite ex-friends, Stacey and Elena. Kara forced us to all get along last year and for a little while, I actually thought they wanted to be my friends. It was all just a lie. They were only using me to show that they could be trusted to do whatever Kara asked of them. As soon as she was gone and named me Head Cheerleader in her absence, they hated me. They wanted to be Co-Captains so badly and some Junior took the job from them. How can they ever like me?

“Didn’t think you’d be here,” Stacey said without even trying to hide her annoyance.

I decided the best course of action was to put these little fucks in their place where they belonged. “Just wanted to be sure you guys didn’t ruin the squad without me. Everything go okay this week? No issues?”

Elena frowned. “No thanks to *you*. You could have told us you weren’t going to be here for so long so we could get things ready.”

“I thought you wanted to run the squad. Couldn’t you handle a couple days without me?”

Stacey rolled her eyes and began to walk away. “You should have stayed in that crackhouse you were living in.” Elena joined her and they got as far away from me as humanly possible. Thank fucking God.

Walking to class, I passed a crowd of the football players. On game day, they were allowed to wear their jerseys to class so everyone could see who was a member of the select few serving their school on the field of battle or whatever they say to hype themselves up. The boys cleared a path so I could pass through. I smiled at each of them for doing so.

For some reason, though, Brad seemed very tense seeing me again. It was weird.

Beth

No one can say I was not being cordial when I locked eyes with Ashley. I made sure to keep a very blank expression that did not give away my true feelings I experienced watching my girlfriend embrace her from behind. It was how I liked to hug Lauren when we were alone. I guess I know why she liked it so much.

Without saying anything, I hoped to prove to Lauren I was willing to be open to Ashley's company. Dare I say I was even willing to befriend the girl? Shocking, I know, given my previous thoughts about her. But if it pleases Lauren then I am willing to try anything once. At the very least, I know the value of having an ally versus an enemy. I learned my lesson with Tracy and had no intention of repeating it.

Not right now, anyway.

In English class, I sat beside Lauren and we waited for class to begin. Katherine broke off for a moment to talk with people in the hallway while we took our seats. I could tell seeing Ashley for the first time since the party was weighing heavily on Lauren, especially considering the last time they were together was when Ashley was very nearly raped. I figured I would let her be alone to process her thoughts. She tended to bottle things up. Good for keeping a public image intact, but horrible for your mental health. We would need to work on that.

To my surprise, she actually wanted to talk about it and spoke very candidly about the situation. "Ashley seems... weird. Right? Did you think so or was it just me?"

Truthfully, I had no opinion on the matter. She seemed a little manic, I suppose.

"I guess?" I intentionally answered as if it were a test and I failed so I could draw an explanation from her that gave me a view into her psyche. Ignorance is bliss.

"She just seemed really positive about everything and now she's really focused on Spencer and the election out of nowhere." Lauren rubbed her hand through her immaculate straw-colored hair. "It's just really weird to me."

"Maybe she figures winning the election is the only thing that will give her life a sense of belonging," I offered. It was the more... shall we say... *PG version* of how I really felt about her sudden rush of ambitions. Thankfully, I had a plan for that as well. I was always three steps ahead of a developing situation, after all.

Lauren considered that. "Maybe she's just lonely."

"Perhaps."

"We should talk to her," Lauren said.

"About...?"

"I'm meeting up with her in the Chem Lab later. Please be there. It's really important and I'd be really happy if you were there with me."

She needs me. I could never say no to her. I smiled and nodded my head. She looked extremely grateful. I could use that.

Katherine entered the room with a wide smile on her face. She sat down on the desk in front of me and showed off a list of names. I scanned the list carefully. "A.V. Club, Chess Team,

and Girls Golf Team all said they'll vote with us," she happily announced. "They were all committed to me before, but I convinced them to support you now that we're working together."

"You have more friends than I thought," I said without thinking. I glanced up and quickly realized my bitchy slip of the tongue. "That came out wrong, I apologize."

"No, I get it," she promised. "I don't know half of those people if we're being completely honest. They just didn't want to vote for Spencer again because they hate the popular people." Realizing she had a slip of her own, she quickly turned to Lauren. "But not you, though! They think you're really cool! Anyone else and they would have said no. Just because they're... you know... asshole jocks."

Lauren was too distracted with Ashley to notice. "I'm just glad they're on board," she replied.

Katherine noticed something was wrong. "You okay?"

"No. We need to talk to her about..." She glanced nervously around the room and whispered. "About the party."

"What about the party?" I asked, feigning ignorance again.

She harshly shushed me as though I just revealed some deathly important secret to the entire school. Why would she get so defensive about it? She was the one who brought it up in the first place. I put on an offended face in the hopes she would feel bad and apologize. I was a little annoyed, but I let it slide. To my surprise, she pressed on with her plea for support and didn't try to make me feel better.

"Something happened to Ashley and I need to talk to her. Will you come with me?"

"I'll be there," Katherine swore.

Despite her actually pissing me off by being so rude, I nodded in support. For better or worse, the truth was going to come out. I needed to expedite my plans with this in mind. I was still working out the kinks, but I figured this could be a step in the right direction if I played my cards right. How, I still was not sure just yet.

The last person to walk in the door for class was none other than Tracy Summers. She froze in the doorway when she saw the three of us together. We each had individual reactions when we noticed she was there.

I stared her down, sparing no mercy with my glare. She quickly looked away from me.

Katherine scowled at her, the betrayal still fresh in her mind.

Lauren looked more disappointed than anything. A strange reaction given the girl intended to distribute compromising pictures of us to the entire school.

Tracy shuffled along the edge of the desks to reach a seat in the far back of the room. She buried her head in her hands to avoid the three of us watching her. I smirked a little and scratched my nose to cover my utter glee in seeing her be brought down to earth and humbled like the pitiful worm she really was.

If it isn't the consequences of my own action, indeed.

Mr. Hardy was about to begin class when he scanned the room twice over. He scrunched his nose, as if he was trying to remember something. It must have come back to him because he asked the group at large, “Any news on where Ashley is? I thought I heard she was back today.”

No one was exactly sure where she went after finishing the conversation with us. I lost track of her for obvious reasons. Maybe she left to go do a line or three in the bathroom.

No, no, no, we talked about this. No more bullying Ashley. Say something nice.

I gotta hand it to her, she really had balls. She actually showed up to school after a week off and then proceeded to skip her first class. If she didn’t have an attitude as sour as a rotten lemon and the personality of a yeast infection, I might actually like her.

Spencer

I really wondered why Ashley didn't want to tell me that she was coming back to school early. But I *really* wondered what made her decide that we were back together and want to make out with me in front of the entire school. The kiss was amazing, but I felt filthy doing it. It's like I was kissing her identical twin sister. I know they are exactly alike physically, but they couldn't be more different mentally. When we talked, she seemed so... weird. Why did she have to make things weird after we patched things up so well a few days ago?

As I was walking to my first class, I sought out Ashley to figure out what the hell was going on. I caught her as she was walking away from Lauren, Beth, and Katherine. I motioned for her to follow me and we entered an empty classroom to talk.

I shut the door behind us and leaned heavily against it, shaking my head.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What was that?"

"What was what? I have no idea what you're talking about?"

I turned around and leaned back against the hard wooden door. She was being serious so I felt the need to spell it out for her. "Back in the hall. The kiss."

She shrugged, her eyebrow raised. "It was a kiss?"

"I know," I said with a touch of impatience. "You *kissed* me."

"Spencer, it was just a kiss, what's the big deal?"

"Don't you remember at the lake when we..." I exhaled heavily, trying to find the words without losing my cool.

"Of course I remember, dude," she said. "Nothing's changed, you know that."

"So are we broken up or not?"

"Um, yes? How is this so hard for you to process?"

I glared at her. "Don't do this."

"Do what?" she asked, her voice raising. "What am I doing? It was *just a kiss*, Spencer."

"If we aren't dating," I retorted, raising my voice to match hers, "why would you make out with me in front of the whole school?"

She scoffed and shifted her weight to one leg. Whenever she wanted to start shit with someone, she'd cross her arms or put them on her hips and lean on her right leg. She must have thought it made her look tough or something.

"Because I'm trying to help you."

"Help me *how*?" I pleaded, trying to make sense of this whole thing. "How does a massive fight during my party that was supposed to be our breakup and a makeout session in the middle of the hallway help *anyone* here? You're acting fucking crazy!"

"Because you're a piece of shit and you need me to win this election," she snapped. "Without me, you're going to lose! Do you really think I'm so pathetic and worthless that being seen kissing me will ruin your life? Boo-fucking-hoo. Get over yourself."

I had no idea what was going on with her. One minute, she's super flirty and outgoing and now she's losing her mind and being a massive bitch over nothing. How was I the bad guy

here? What did I do to deserve being treated like this? I'm trying to help her and she's going to act like this. And now she's trying to blame it on the fucking election? That stupid, meaningless, pathetic popularity contest that was turning everyone around me into a power-hungry dictator wannabe? Was I the only one who didn't actually care? Why does everyone else get to decide if I'm allowed to care about anything or not? You don't want me to care? Fine. Forget it. I'm done caring about anyone here. Fuck them all.

"No wonder Lauren dumped you."

Both of our eyes went wide. I never meant to say that. It just slipped out. She took a step backwards, her confidence shattered. I knew exactly how to hurt her and I did it without hesitation. My dad's right. I am a piece of shit.

Ashley stormed past me, all but throwing me out of the doorway. I called after her and cried out apology after apology, but she didn't care. She kept walking down the hallway and turned a corner. I wouldn't be shocked if she never spoke to me again and this was the last time we ever saw each other. After the way we had reconnected and actually grew close, I would never want to speak to me again if I were her.

I slammed the bottom of my fist down on the nearest desk with all my might. I thought I broke my hand and shattered my pinkie finger. It would have been a mercy. Then I'd never have to worry about football or elections or popularity again. I could just be an average joe with no grand future or ambitions that will probably work at a desk for the rest of my life. I considered punching the desk again just so I could actually fracture something. It was so tempting.

But I didn't. And now I was in pain and had to live with the consequences.

Ashley

I felt like I was going to explode and scream and throw a brick through a wall and cry and scream again. I come back for twenty minutes and I'm already losing my shit. My body felt like it was on fire and I was twitching with rage and fuck I felt so angry. Who was he to talk to me like that? I ended up missing first period because I had to go to the bathroom to calm down but it did nothing and now it's third period and I have to meet with Lauren after school and this is all too much I should have just stayed home why the fuck did I do this to myself?

Psych seemed to last eternity. I could feel myself sweating in my seat and I had to fidget every couple minutes because I was so worked up. Why did it feel like I had tunnel vision? Why was I such a mess? I had to get out of there. If the bell didn't ring, I might have vomited right in the middle of class.

Seriously, who the fuck was Spencer to talk to me like that? I thought we were friends and *this* is how he treats me? Never again. He's a piece of shit.

Any other time, I would have definitely said no, but I was so angry and hurt and worked up that when Jason Sanders, a Senior defensive back, asked me to meet up during fourth period study hall, I couldn't say no. I knew what he wanted just from how he spoke to me. He was easier to read than a Dr. Seuss book. Lucky for me, I keep an emergency condom in my purse (which I change out every couple months with a fresh, non-expired one to avoid an accidental pregnancy) and it was just a matter of waiting for study hall.

Spencer was the only guy I had ever had sex with so I was very curious how this would go. I didn't care about anything except hooking up with one of his teammates to get back at him. He said he was really into me and heard that me and Spencer broke up. I figured this was as good enough a reason as any to get with somebody. I'm gonna die alone anyway.

We met up in the equipment room to do the deed. The room was left unlocked by the janitors so the coaches and equipment managers could retrieve equipment before the game later. There wasn't practice later because of the game and the equipment managers wouldn't be in to grab stuff for the away game until closer to three-thirty. We had plenty of time to get it over with.

He was lying back on a pile of pads used for blocking, letting me rest on top of him and run my hands through his hair and across his chest, which was actually really broad for someone his size. He was only around 5'9" but was surprisingly buff. He looked more drunk with every kiss and every time I allowed myself to run my hands over him, he seemed like he could barely control himself. I wasn't worried about being caught.

But then he pulled away.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I tried to catch my breath.

"Fuck... I'm sorry, I can't. You're with Spencer. I'm sorry."

"No we aren't," I corrected him. "We broke up at his party."

"But what about the kiss?" He looked genuinely confused. "Everyone knows about it."

"That didn't stop you from trying to get with me," I countered. He looked offended so I backtracked. "I just wanted to mess with people. Especially him. It was just to help him win the election. But we're not dating. We broke up at the party." I then thought of something and

needed an answer from him right away. “Why did you want to hook up with me in the first place?” I asked. “Why now?”

He thought about it for a second and sighed. “Look, I heard you guys fighting earlier and I figured this was my shot,” he admitted, his voice heavy with guilt. “Plus I heard that you were into me and I wanted to see if something would happen, but now that it’s happening... I just can’t do it. We’re on the same team. I couldn’t do that to my brother.”

“You’re passing on an opportunity to be with *me*?” I asked, gently pressing my chest closer together with my forearms. I needed this as much as he did. He just needed the extra encouragement. “No restraints. Whatever you want.”

I could see the hunger in his eyes. I’d be the hottest girl he ever got with in his life. He’d tell all of his friends about this for the rest of his life after he graduated from here. I knew I could change this little fucker’s life.

But he swallowed whatever desire he had and said, “Yes... yeah, I am. I’m sorry.”

“Then why’d you even bother showing up here?” I bitterly asked.

He looked at me closely. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Spencer had the same look in his eyes when we fought earlier. He thought I was a loser, too. “What happened to you?”

I stood up and pushed him back into the pads hard when he tried to follow me. “Fuck you, asshole.”

I left the room, straightening my hair as I walked away. That was ten minutes I would never get back. I’m just glad I didn’t waste a perfectly good condom on that dweeb. He wasn’t worth my time. Pathetic loser. He’s probably never had sex before in his life.

Beth

I eagerly waited in the hallway for the return of the conquering hero. All three of us had study hall in different classrooms so it was no trouble getting a bathroom pass. I waited for what I believed was a comfortable time for two teenagers to do their business before exiting my classroom to wait for a status report. He owed me one for suggesting the equipment room as the place to do it. In turn, I could thank Tracy for that, I suppose.

To my surprise, I ended up waiting an extra ten minutes before Jason finally approached me. I could tell by his unhappy expression that he had been unable to copulate with the little dirty blonde siren and was left with a cruel date with blue balls.

"I was wondering if you'd even show up," I said with a slight grin. "How was it?"

"She was totally into me, but..." He sighed and impatiently rubbed his forehead.

"Couldn't do it?" I asked with the slightest hint of pity to soothe his ego. If I know Ashley as well as I think I do, I most definitely know she was not, to paraphrase the sexually-repressed jerkoff standing before me, "totally into him," and probably kicked him out before they could get too serious. He did have some lipstick on his neck, though. Good for him at least getting *something*.

"I couldn't betray Spencer like that, man," he said, oblivious to my rather obvious gender identity. "I know she wanted it, but I couldn't... I don't know..."

"Trust me, Spencer is not in this picture anymore. You would be doing him a favor, in my opinion anyway. Seeing her with another guy who deserves her is exactly what he needs to move on and meet someone new."

"But aren't they still a thing?" he asked, ignoring the green light I just flashed in his face. "They, like, kissed and everything."

"She's been losing interest," I said. "That was only a move to make people think they made up so they could go back to being a power couple around here. Obviously it worked because even someone who was at his own party was fooled. I mean, come on, you saw the fight. We all did. How could they possibly come back from that?"

He considered that, shifting his weight around as he stood there in front of me. "And she wants *me* now? You're absolutely sure?"

"That's what she told me," I said. A lie, but I had good intentions.

"Damn... Anyone else and I'd absolutely go for it. But—"

I was growing tired of him beating around the bush. He wants to get his rocks off, but he also wants to be a morally upstanding citizen. I get it. "You don't have to explain to me. I just wanted to help her out. She said she thought you were hot and would be a good fuck. That's it."

Striking at his teenage boy brain that existed only to watch MMA and masturbate must have struck a nerve because I could tell the thought of being with a total hottie like Ashley Williams was weighing heavily on him, for both good and bad reasons. I do find it remarkable that the possibility of teenage pregnancy, a scenario which basically derails your life if you are stupid enough to allow it to happen to you, was totally okay, but the concept of betraying your quarterback who rarely speaks to you is where you draw the line.

“Oh, God, Spencer’s gonna kill me,” he groaned.

“I seriously doubt that,” I said before turning to walk back to my study hall.

I offered the bait and she declined. As much as it pained me to admit it, I was actually kind of proud of her for not accepting an easy hookup from a random boy she has rarely ever spoken to. It may hurt my plans, but it does raise my overall opinion of her ever so slightly. But now I was back at square one. We still had the meeting with her later to sort her out.

Spencer

After my screaming match with Ashley, I ended up fighting a migraine for the rest of the morning. Ashley was being the most unreasonable person in the world. Why did I ever try to be her friend? If she's going to be this difficult after all the bonding we did and after all the times we made sure to say that we were just looking to be friends now, I wasn't going to do this again. If she wants me out of her life, then so be it. She's crazy.

By the time fourth period came and went, I was in a daze. I needed to sleep before the game. I was going to be stuck on the sidelines all night and I was going to be grumpy and bored. If I didn't get some rest to calm down after all the shit with Ashley went down, I was going to explode.

The bell rang and I made for my locker. My plan was to gather my things and go take a nap in the weight room or the equipment room or something. Somewhere that people would be able to get me if I slept in. I was busy gathering my things when I felt a tap on the shoulder. I turned and saw Jason standing there with a very guilty look on his face. He tried to speak, but the words must have caught in his throat. We awkwardly stared at each other for a couple seconds before I broke the silence for him.

"You alright, dude? You look like death."

"Yeah, yeah, totally, I just, uh..." He nervously rubbed his arm and stared at the lockers behind me. I thought he was about to shoot me or something. He exhaled and said, "Something happened earlier and I wanted to tell you before it got out and you decided to kill me 'cause I feel really guilty and I'm so so sorry and—"

I held my hands up, begging him to stop and take a breath. "Dude, slow down. You're making me nervous. What are you talking about?"

Jason nervously glanced around the hallway as hundreds of kids passed us by, going about their business. If they cared about what he had to say, they were doing a terrible job of spying on us. He motioned for me to follow him to an empty classroom. I wondered how much longer this would take. I needed a nap.

"I made out with Ashley in the equipment room," he said really fast before hanging his head with shame. "But we didn't do anything else 'cause I stopped, I swear, so please don't hurt me, I swear it was a one time thing—"

I stepped forward to take him by the shoulders, forcing him to look me in the eyes. "Jay. Calm down. Take a breath."

He winced. "If you're gonna break my jaw, do it now before I puke."

"What? No, I'm not going to hurt you."

He looked genuinely shocked I would show him mercy. Like the idea of me not breaking every bone in his body was foreign to him. Jason always had a rather nervous and introverted disposition, but I never knew he could be this insufferable. It was like I was talking to that Wormtongue guy from Lord of the Rings.

"Wait, what?"

"Just tell me why you kissed her?" I asked him firmly. "I'm not mad. Just tell me."

“She... she started coming onto me. Earlier in the hallway. Well, okay, one of her friends told me that *she* was into me and wanted to hook up so I went to her to see what was up and she said she was down. And I knew it was wrong, but... I mean, come on, it’s *Ashley*.”

“Who told you that?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine anyone actually lying about this. Who would even do it? Casey and Heather would never say that. Michelle wouldn’t either. Maybe someone on the squad who is jealous of her or wants to make her quit? Fuck, am I really going to become protective of her again? After everything that happened?

“I really don’t know her,” he said. “She’s short. Kinda spindly. Brown hair. She never said her name.”

I assumed he was telling the truth ’cause he was a horrible liar. I was more shocked he knew the meaning of the word “spindly” than him trying to make a move on Ashley. No matter how many times I tried to assure him that we were broken up, he still treated her like she was my property. Like he had tried to take my prized horse out for a ride or something. That’s a terrible analogy in hindsight.

“Thank you for being honest,” I said, trying to end this conversation and get on with my life. “I’ll go talk to her and I’ll see you at the game tonight.”

His eyes were still wide and his face white as a ghost. “Yeah... yeah, yeah, that’s fine. Good. Thank you! See you!”

I brushed past him, leaving him with his thoughts and reassuring him that I wasn’t totally done with him. But for now, I needed to find Ash and try to make her calm down and see reason. What could have happened to make her act this way? If I couldn’t figure it out, I would go to Lauren for help. She’d know what to do. I really regretted saying what I did to Ashley. I don’t regret fighting with her, she needed to hear someone carefully explain to her why she’s wrong. But what I said was terrible.

The bell rang, signaling the start of the thirty minute study hall. I scoured the hallways, looking for Ashley. Whether it was blind dumb luck or a horrible coincidence, I saw her turn and walk into the chem lab further down the hallway.

This was the best time to confront her, I reasoned. If there ever was one.

Beth

We sat around the room as though it were an intervention. Given Ashley's not-so-private habits, I am not exactly incorrect in making that comparison.

Katherine sat at one of the elongated chemistry lab tables off to the right of the doorway, nervously playing with her hands to pass the time. The success or failure of this meeting was obviously affecting her. We had the odds stacked against us. I barely knew Ashley and here I was about to tell her to change her life and get better. I sat at a table near the windows on the left side of the room, sitting with my head resting in my elbow. I normally prefer to sit up straight, but my nights of little sleep were beginning to catch up to me.

Lauren, meanwhile, would sit in the middle of the room. For now, though, she was waiting in the doorway with her phone in hand. I grew tired of her checking it every other second to see if Ashley had responded to her text informing her of where to go.

"Oh," Lauren exclaimed. I sat up to see what was the matter. "She's coming."

Lauren stepped outside to wait for her while we prepared ourselves. We were told to think of things to say to Ashley to remind her how much she meant to us. Of course mine were total bullshit and she would know it as soon as I said it, but I suppose *the thought that counts* is as applicable in this situation as any other. I was really just here to fill the room. We all know how much she hates me and how the feeling was mutual.

After a minute or so, Lauren stepped inside. I expected her to hold the door open, but she allowed Ashley to come in willingly without someone there to force her back inside.

When Ashley did step inside, she glanced at myself and Katherine for a moment to take in what was happening before throwing on her sweetest, most positive smile. "Am I about to get mugged or something?"

Lauren leaned against the desk and motioned to the door. "Ash, could you...?"

Ashley turned to close the door, but a body threw itself into the frame and cut her off. She jumped a little. It was funny.

"Ash, can we..." Spencer looked around the room at the three beautiful women inside and grew extremely confused. "Am I interrupting something?"

Ashley did him no favors by smiling up at him and saying, "No, Spencer, we're just passing out guns."

Spencer's mouth opened for a second, but no words came out.

"What's up, Spencer?" Lauren interjected.

"Nothing, I just need to talk to Ashley."

"So do we," Lauren said. "Wanna sit down with us?"

Despite his confusion, Spencer took a seat against the wall. He avoided eye contact with myself and Katherine, focusing more on the subject of our meeting. She was like a human art piece in the center of the room, about to be captured by people who loved her and cared for her and saw her for the amazing girl she truly was. I guess.

"Is this supposed to be an intervention or something?" Ashley asked, shrugging off the previous interruption and getting down to brass tacks.

“Ash, we’re worried about you,” Lauren said to lead the conversation. “All of us.”

Ashley cocked her head to the side and glanced over at me. “Even you?”

“*Especially* me,” I said. “I’m not going to sit back and watch you destroy yourself.”

Ashley scoffed and shook her head. “Yeah, whatever. So I guess this is an intervention.” She looked up and stared at each of us individually, waiting for someone to speak up. When no one did, she continued. “I haven’t used since last week. Spencer made sure of that. Speaking of, you owe me two hundred bucks for everything you flushed. So whatever you want to talk about, let’s get it over with because the bus leaves for the game in an hour and I wanna get food.”

“I’m very proud of you. I’m sure everyone here is as well,” I said. “But that’s not why we’re here.”

Ashley frowned. Lauren kept glancing back and forth at Ashley and Spencer, unsure of what to do. Eventually, she looked to me for support. I nodded my head.

Lauren looked to Spencer. “Something happened at your party...” She looked back to Ashley. “To you...”

“What?” Spencer asked obliviously.

“Nothing happened,” Ashley assured him. “I got really drunk and wandered off when I woke up. That’s it.”

I wondered how much she actually remembered from that night. Researching roofies made me come to the conclusion that she probably could not remember much, but exactly how much was open to debate. I was eager to learn the effects of the drug first-hand on someone of Ashley’s stature without actually consuming them myself. I assumed we were about the same height and weight. This is scientific research at its finest.

“Something did,” Lauren said, the memory making her sick, “and I walked in before anything really bad could happen, but I need you to *promise* you’ll stay calm before I can tell you.” She looked at Ashley. “I don’t think you can remember.”

“What happened?” Spencer demanded, trying to push through to the main event.

Before Ashley could speak up and try to defuse the situation, Lauren began stammering. “I went looking for the bathroom and I found her on the bed and he was standing over her and she was half-naked and—”

“Who is *he*?” Spencer demanded through a clenched jaw as his hands curled into fists. His primal desire to protect his little fuck buddy was going to lead to his arrest if he could not control his anger. It was a sight I would have loved to witness.

“Lauren, stop,” Ashley pleaded. “Let’s talk about this later.”

“Brad.”

“I’m gonna kill him,” Spencer said.

“No, Spencer, don’t,” Katherine pleaded.

“This is bullshit,” Ashley muttered. “I’m out of here.”

“Ashley—”

“*Nothing happened!*” Ashley made for the door, her jaw clenched with anger.

“Ashley, *sit down!*” I yelled out. Everyone stopped and stared at me. The amount of times I have ever raised my voice at someone could be counted on one hand. No one saw it coming, Ashley the least of all. “We’re trying to help you, but if you want to keep playing the victim for the rest of your life, then fine. Get out of here so the people who actually care about you can decide how to help you. Whether you like it or not, we’re trying to do what is best for you so I suggest you sit down and hear us out.”

If she had ever been talked down to like that before, I do not know. But I knew my speech worked. She slowly stepped back into the room and sat down. Some dogs need to be broken before you can play with them, especially ones who are at risk of hurting themselves.

“What did Brad do?” Spencer asked more calmly than before. Ashley didn’t answer so it was up to Lauren to fill him in.

“I walked in on him taking her dress off while she was passed out in your guest room.”

Spencer sat back in his seat. He looked like someone just shot him in the stomach. “Jesus Christ...”

“But he didn’t actually get the chance to do anything! I got there before...”

Spencer shook his head, a mixture of pity and disgust and fear clear as day in his eyes. He looked to Ashley for answers. “Did you drink too much and pass out?”

He could have worded it in a little less of a *victim blamey* way, in my opinion. Ashley refused to answer that specific question. She looked *pissed* at how he said that.

“I think he was trying to drug me.”

All eyes turned to sweet little Katherine, sitting comfortably behind Lauren. I was fascinated why she came to that conclusion and wondered what prompted her to make it all about her. Narcissism? Unlikely. She was too nice for that.

“He was coming onto me all night,” she continued, “but Ashley told me he was weird and kept me away from him. Before she went to sleep, I tried some of the beer he poured, but I hated it and Ashley finished it for me. I felt a little sick after, but I don’t know if it was from the beer or... I really think there was something in it.”

“This was in the kitchen, right?” Spencer asked, piecing things together.

Katherine nodded. “But she didn’t even seem tired before she had that drink.”

“So you think Brad was trying to dose you with something?” Spencer asked. “But accidentally got Ashley instead when she drank your beer for you.”

“And he decided to go for it because she was there,” Lauren finished.

They sat in silence. I, meanwhile, was giddy as a schoolgirl. I could barely contain my excitement. Watching them all play detective was quite endearing. They also filled me in on any missing pieces from that night that I was lacking. With all this knowledge in mind, I could proceed with whatever plans I had without fear of repercussions.

“I was fine before I drank it,” Ashley quietly admitted, every word filled with shame. “I mean, I think I was. I’ve drank much more than that and... I just... I can’t remember.” Tears began to stream down her soft cheeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Spencer softly asked her.

"Because I was mad and confused and really sick and dizzy and I just wanted some sleep," she answered, her voice cracking. "But I can't remember anything now."

Spencer turned to Lauren. "And you're absolutely positive it was him?"

"Yes."

Spencer shook his head, his rage building again. "I'll fuckin' kill him."

"No, you won't," I ordered. "Stay there. Don't do anything you'll regret."

Spencer did not like being told to contain his anger and glared at me for a moment before forcing himself to chill out a little. He sighed. "Ash, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"How?" Ashley asked as she wiped her eyes. "You didn't put that shit in my drink."

"It was my party. And we fought."

"And I was being an ass to you. Don't blame yourself for my shit."

"Nobody's blaming anyone, Ash," Katherine said with a voice as sweet as honey. "Especially not you. We're here to help you. All of us."

"How?" Ashley wanted nothing more than to bury that bastard under six feet of dirt, but the reality was she was entirely correct when she said, "We don't have any evidence. We can't prove there was anything in my drink. He'd deny it. What can we *do*?"

Obviously, no one else had any answers. She was exactly correct. One allegation would do nothing. In addition to all of the political reasons why going after someone with the societal standing of Brad Kendrick was a horrendous idea, they had no physical proof he actually *did anything* except the eyewitness testimony of a single girl.

These people were terribly out of their element. I was forced to guide them in the correct direction so they could figure something out for themselves. "We'd need to make him confess."

"How do we do that?" Katherine asked.

"I don't know. We'd need to get him to do it on his own, but we can't record him doing it without his permission or they'd never take it in court and we'd be risking ourselves by doing it."

Texas is a one-party consent state. This means that you only need the consent of either the recorder *or* the one being recorded to submit a confession into a court of law. But I do not have the money for one of the wires the Feds use to bring down mobsters and it would be pretty obvious if I tried to get a confession from him with my phone in my hand. And besides, Brad would obviously never put himself in a position to confess this kind of thing. At least, I assumed so. Who knows what kind of dumb shit a would-be rapist would do to impress people. In the meantime, I just needed them to hold them over until I had an actual plan to work with. They need not know of my own little ideas in the meantime.

"I could kick his ass until he fesses up," Spencer threatened.

"Let's not do that, okay," Lauren said, trying to soothe the Rocky Balboa inside of him.

"What am I supposed to do?!" he cried. "He tried to... Ash, we need to do something!"

"And we will," I said, preventing Ashley from possibly giving him the ammunition to go forward with kicking his ass. As funny as it would be to see them fight, it would hurt us far too much to be worth it. "But first we need *proof*. Until then, we can't let him know we're onto him. We need to stay calm and wait for the best moment to proceed. Can we do that?"

All eyes turned to Spencer, who finally nodded his head, albeit extremely reluctantly. His intentions may have been noble, but his actions would have sunk us faster than the Titanic. We needed to keep him in check if anything was every going to get done around here.

"I promise I'll do everything I can to stop this freak," Lauren swore.

"Same here," Katherine chimed in.

"Nobody hurts you and gets away with it," Spencer warned. "Nobody."

"I'll do whatever I can, too," I promised. I was not lying, for once.

Ashley proceeded to thank us all profusely through her sad little puppy dog tears. We all group hugged as a sign of solidarity. My hand accidentally brushed by Ashley's chest when we reached in for the embrace. I wondered if she felt the spark I did.

When we departed and went our separate ways, I realized that I would need to expedite my plans. Not only was Spencer a liability for myself and Lauren, he was a liability to everything around us as well. He could not be trusted to keep the peace. I know his type all too well. The "macho-wannabe-chivalrous-goodie-goodie" who will do down swinging for the girl and for what is right while simultaneously being a massive hypocrite who resorts to violence and destruction to achieve his goals. If he confronted Brad before I could take him out of the picture on my own, we were doomed. Brad could very well be onto us, specifically Lauren as she was the only witness, and would stop at nothing to cover his own ass and ruin us. I saw it before. I have dealt with it before as well.

For better or worse, I was left with the impossible task of saving Ashley's reputation at Arlington City High.

Fuck.

My first trick involved getting the phone of the neanderthal causing all of us this headache. The football team had a team dinner after the end-of-the-day study hall when they were having an away game. It was a tradition. It was also a rule that no phones were allowed because the team was supposed to focus on the game and family and faith and whatever other crap they said during their pre-game speeches. Anyone caught with one had it snapped in half by the offensive coordinator. I've seen it happen before. It's pretty funny.

After entering a combination I acquired through very legal means into the lock, Brad's locker door swung open. The inside of the door was covered with pictures of the team and cutouts from newspapers of Brad's individual successes and other memorabilia of a time he would look back on with awe twenty years from now when he has two kids he resents and a wife who hates him. That was not what I came for, though.

I glanced back and forth to be sure no one was looking before proceeding.

After a minute or two of scouring his backpack, I finally found it buried in one of the pockets. It was the newest model. Only the best for the little rich boy. I buried it in my pocket before locking the door back up and hurrying away.

Ashley owed me for this. More than she knows.

REVELATIONS

Spencer

I didn't know what I was doing. I had no appetite. All I could do was sit and stare at that monster sitting three tables over. Laughing. Smiling. I dared him to look over at me. Nothing would have made me happier than to walk over and kick the shit out of him for what he did. The worst part is he absolutely would have killed me if I tried, but it would be worth it for just one or two punches to land.

We were having spaghetti for dinner, but I wasn't going to eat. I'd rather starve on the sidelines than try to force myself to eat near him. My stomach was killing me. I didn't know I could get so worked up until today. I pushed any of my beef with Ashley to the back of my mind. To some extent, I did understand why she was such a mess. I forgave her.

Frank saw me scowling. "You alright, man?"

"No."

My simple one word answer was dripping with venom. Frank knew better than to ask what was wrong and went back to his food. I watched him dig through his backpack and grow more anxious as he looked further. He said something to the people beside him before getting up and moving from table to table, saying something to the people as he went. When he was one table away from us, I had to get up and walk away. I couldn't dare face him right now.

"Hey, have you guys seen my phone?" I heard him ask the table as I walked away.

The guys said no and he walked away cursing under his breath.

I stood by the serving table with all the food, forcing myself to focus on my breathing and relax. I'm sure I looked like a massive idiot just standing there. Oh well.

"You alright, son?" Coach Mullens stood beside me, a paper plate full of spaghetti in one hand and a glass of water in another. He was notorious for never drinking coke and mocked anyone around him who did. He was weird like that, but very healthy for a man his age.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good."

"Good." He took a sip of his water.

"Who's gonna start tonight?" I casually asked. Having missed practice twice, I wasn't sure which of my backups was doing the best in my absence.

"I'm leaning towards Jamar, but Justin will be ready to go if I ask him to," he answered. "Still haven't made up my mind. I want them to both be ready."

Jamar Watford and Justin Elliott were both good guys. Watford was only a Sophomore and Elliott a Senior who never got a chance after I was named starter last season. He wasn't bitter about it, though. He was just happy to be there. I admired that. Either of them would be fine replacements. After them, Frank was the emergency starter and God help us if he had to play something besides halfback or receiver.

"Did you have a recommendation?" he asked with genuine intrigue in my response.

I glanced back at their table, a playbook sprawled out in front of them. They were ready to do whatever it took to win, even studying with the guy they should be competing with. That's why I hated competitions like the election. Why should people fight over something they could work together on?

“I’d go with Jamar,” I answered honestly. “He’s much faster than I am so if his arm fails him, he can at least run for his life.” He seemed to find that amusing. If he was still mad at me, he didn’t show it. “You want to try something crazy?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Have Elliott line up as a receiver, run a reverse, and take a pitch from Jamar while Frank is sprinting downfield. Like that play from Super Bowl 40. If Elliott has the arm I think he does, he should be able to hit him before anyone can figure out what’s going on. They’d never see it coming.”

That play was burned into my mind. My dad owned DVD copies of every Super Bowl and had me watch them religiously growing up. Thought I’d absorb some of their magic or something stupid like that. That was one of my favorite plays in the history of football.

Coach smiled at me. “I’ll keep that in mind. Enjoy your dinner.”

Beth

Following the meeting with Ashley that went about as well as could be expected, Lauren and I hurried off to get dinner before the student charter bus pulled out of the school to go to the game. Katherine went home to get changed and said Ashley would drive her so she would meet us there. In the meantime, I got to spend some quality time with my girlfriend before we watched some sweaty jackasses hit each other. I hated how this was becoming a weekly occurrence for us.

“Do you still wanna go to the game tonight?” Lauren asked me as she toyed with her food. She barely ate a thing since we got there.

“Of course,” I responded. “Why wouldn’t I?”

She shrugged and stared off into space. “Today’s been so shitty. Honestly, I don’t think I even want to go anymore,” she admitted.

“I think it’ll be fun.” I lied through my teeth. “And besides, Katherine is still going. How would you feel if you just became one of her close friends and ditched her the first time you were meant to hang out?”

Lauren sighed and nodded. “Yeah. You’re right. I’m just really stressed.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?” I asked.

“It’s just all the stuff with Ashley,” she said. “I hated being the one to tell her what was going on. I mean, seriously, how *fucked* is it that that almost happened to her?! And now Spencer knows? Fuck me, man...”

“It’s better that they know and you don’t bottle it all up inside,” I advised. “You did the right thing. And don’t worry about *Brad Kendrick*.” I made sure I said his name with a sneer. He really was disgusting. “We’re gonna get this bastard. I promise.”

I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. She smiled and squeezed back. I wanted to kiss her, but sadly we were in public and that could be frowned upon. I could wait until we got back to the car, much as I would have preferred to get it over with now.

As much as I did not want to go to another dumb football game, spending some time with her was going to be amazing as always. Katherine was proving to be a good companion as well. She was very easy to talk to. I wondered why she was so unable to make friends. Crippling social anxiety must have been too much for the poor girl to overcome.

I figured the game was going to be another uneventful waste of our time. If I had it my way, we would go back to her place, snuggle up on the couch with ice cream and bad movies that we could talk over and laugh at. Those were the best dates we ever had. I hate crowds.

Spencer

By the time halftime began, our morale was in the toilet. We sat around the visitor locker room in stunned silence. I took my place in the back of the room with Nick the Equipment Manager and the guys on the team who were hurt. We didn't call it Cripple Corner for nothing. All the losers wrapped up together with nothing better to do but watch Coach Mullens and the others tear the starts a new one.

The score was only 21-10 in their favor, which was very manageable for a competent team to overcome, but things couldn't look more hopeless on our end. The defense was uninspired, the offense was stagnant. Only a kickoff returned for a touchdown early in the second and one long drive that resulted in a field goal yielded us any points. We didn't even have a hundred yards of total offense. I was buddies with a guy who kept stats on the sideline and he was as disappointed in the guys as I was.

Worst of all was the situation at quarterback.

Coach did end up starting Jamar, but he got hurt early on when Manny Fernandez, our right tackle, absolutely whiffed on a block and the left defensive end absolutely crushed the poor guy like a pancake. I could tell right away Jamar had a concussion. He was being looked over by Sean, our athletic trainer, and there was no way he was coming back today.

Justin, meanwhile, somehow got it even worse. He tried to scramble when the line fell apart for the tenth time and ended up getting trapped underneath a bunch of the linemen from both teams. His ankle snapped like a twig and he was carted off the field, screaming in pain. I had to cover my ears, it was so loud.

Frank ended up playing two series as the only quarterback left on the depth chart. They didn't even try to attempt a pass play with him and Austin Prep figured out what was going on fairly quickly. We got a grand total of seven yards in eight downs with Frank under center.

"Come on, guys, we *need this!*" Coach Mullens roared, snapping me out of my daydream. "What the fuck is going on out there?!"

No one had an answer. Even the Offensive and Defensive Coordinators looked defeated.

"Coach..."

All eyes turned to Frank, the one with enough balls to speak up.

"I can't play quarterback," he admitted. Then he pointed to the back of the room. "But Spencer can."

"*Spencer* is suspended," he reminded him. His tone stung, even if I deserved it. "So if you can't do it, we'll find somebody who fuckin' can!"

"He's right," Tom said from the bench in front of me. "We can't win without him."

"If you can't win without *one guy*, maybe we should just go the fuck home," Coach Mullens snarled. Even if he believed them, he refused to let up when he was mad.

"Coach," a very familiar voice called out, "what's the point in trying to win States if we just give up in week two? Spencer is our Captain. We need him."

Hearing Brad speak about me that way only infuriated me. Hearing him stand up for me after trying to rape Ashley a week ago was more than I could handle. If I didn't hear Coach Mullens call out my name, I might have spat in his face.

"Well, Spencer?" Coach Mullens asked. "Do you think you deserve to play?"

If I wanted to, I could have just quit on the team right there. Said no and accepted my punishment like a man. They could keep hating me for abandoning the team *again* and things could go back to normal by Monday afternoon when I was given control of the offense again and my will to live was sapped even more.

But I knew better. People were counting on me.

"No," I answered immediately. I wasn't stupid. I knew exactly what kind of test this was. "I abandoned you guys. I don't deserve to play." Without missing a beat, I continued speaking. "But I won't abandon you now when you need me most. If you'll let me play now and you'll give me the trust you had before this week, I promise I'll give you everything I got. And most all, we do this for Justin. He deserves a win after what happened to him."

Adding in the *sympathy for Justin* angle might have been a bit much, but I thought I gave a good enough speech. And I meant every word of it. I don't say things I don't mean. The one thing I hate more than anything in the world is a hypocrite.

Coach Mullens thought things over for a very long time, never taking his eyes off of me. I returned his stare with one of my own. He nodded and glanced at Nick. "Get him what he needs. He's going in after the kickoff."

I nodded at him and we were sent to meet with our coordinators to prepare for the second half. We'd only have twenty-four minutes to make this comeback. Surprisingly, I wasn't worried at all. As long as the team got it together as a whole, I knew we could fucking do this. We once scored thirty-eight points in a single quarter. It was going to be difficult because that team was good, but damn if I wasn't going to give it everything I had. I owed it to these guys.

Coach Mullens pulled me aside before we went back to the field.

"Don't make me regret this."

"Never."

Now donning my shoulder pads and jersey, I led the team down the gravel pathway and we jogged back onto the field. I didn't have time to think about Brad or Ashley or anything. I had to focus on the game. That was where I was needed most.

This is what I was born for.

Katherine

When Spencer took the field after the halftime break, it was like the visitor section woke up from a long nap. It was like they got struck by lightning. Everyone was on their feet, stomping and cheering for their hero. So many obscenities were thrown toward the home team's student section. I was more excited to see him than anyone. The way he just took command of the team, barking out orders so loudly that you could hear them from the bleachers...

I don't think it's wrong of me for having a massive crush on him. What girl wouldn't? Even if he was a total jerk who kinda set me up by having Tracy fake being my friend... I blame Frank more than him for that. Kind of. From what Beth told me after the meeting with Ashley, it seemed like he was the one who came up with that little plan. Spencer just signed off on it.

Seeing Spencer stick up for Ashley and want to do anything to protect her really changed my mind about him again, for the better. He wasn't just the really cute quarterback. He was a sweet, down-to-earth guy who cared about the people around him. I wished he would show that side of him more at school. I know the guys expected each other to be all tough and macho and whatever, but he was a good guy at heart.

It felt weird spending time with his ex while totally gushing over him from the sidelines. Ashley wasn't allowed to cheer because she missed so much time, but that didn't stop her from showing up and sitting with us in the student's section. I have to admit, she was a lot nicer than I remembered during Sophomore year. When we first started high school, she was honestly kind of a bitch and as she began spending more and more time with Kara Alderman and her little posse during Sophomore year, she got really *really* nasty, but something must have mellowed her out over the summer because she was quickly becoming the kindest person I had ever met. Us hanging out at Spencer's party really humanized her in my eyes, but the intervention made me really see her as an actual person and made me want to be closer with her more than anything. She even bought me food at the game because I couldn't go with Beth and Lauren to get dinner.

Despite all her faults, she was a good person. I hoped she would realize that sooner rather than later. She seemed like she was really hurting.

For the entirety of the third quarter, Spencer and the rest of the team seemed unstoppable. The guys came to life with him at the helm. They scored twice within four minutes and the defense was stopping them at every turn. Spencer was hooting and hollering on the sidelines, making sure everyone was into it, jumping for joy and forcing the student section to get into it. He was in his element.

God, he's so cute.

Going through the fourth quarter, though, the offense froze up and the score was tied at 24-24 with two minutes left. Our sideline was almost silent because Austin Prep was marching down the field. Lauren and Beth stepped away to get a couple more waters, leaving me alone with Ashley.

"This is gonna be close, huh?" Ashley asked.

"Looks like it."

“If he wins this, he’s going to be an even bigger hero than he already is,” Ashley commented. I wondered if she was still into him, even if she was totally in love with Lauren. I wasn’t even sure if she was into guys at all, but it was plain as day that she cared about him on some level. The intervention made it seem like it was over, but who knows?

“He deserves it,” I said. I never took my eyes off of him.

Ashley gave me a once-over and smiled. “Somebody’s in love.”

I blushed hard and I knew it. It only made me blush harder. “What? What, no. No, I’m not.”

Ashley grinned at me. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“I—”

The rest of the visitor section erupted with cheers, scaring me out my shoes. We turned our attention to the field and saw Frank celebrating with the football. Apparently someone sacked the quarterback and knocked the ball free. Frank recovered it and he was going nuts. Spencer ran out onto the field and embraced his best friend, calling for the offense to follow.

With less than a minute to go, we had the ball and could win it.

“Talk to me after the game,” Ashley said with a wink after the cheering died down a little. “Homecoming is coming up. I’ll see what I can do.”

Spencer

From my view on the sidelines, I was the first one to see Tom rip the ball from the other quarterback's hands when he got sacked. I started screaming "BALL! BALL! BALL!" and enthusiastically pointed toward Austin's end zone when Frank fell on top of it. I thought sending two corners to blitz was a horrible idea, but it worked out. They never saw it coming. This is why I'm not a defensive coordinator. I sprinted onto the field and grabbed Frank by the helmet, happily screaming and jumping up and down with him to celebrate. The rest of the offense ran out to meet us.

We had 0:33 seconds to either go sixty-three yards and score or get within range for Parkman to win it with a field goal. With two timeouts left, I liked our chances, but I wasn't going to let myself get overconfident. These guys were really good.

Coach gave me the signal from the sideline and I relayed it to the team. Frank was supposed to line up as a receiver, run a comeback, and get out of bounds. If that failed, I had other options.

I gave my cadence and took the shotgun snap. The defense was playing zone a few yards deep so I just had to wait for someone to get into position. Frank was doubled up so I looked around until I found Mikey, our Tight End, open over the middle. I gunned it to him and he broke off for another ten or so before getting wrapped up.

Coach called a timeout and we jogged to the sidelines. Sweat was dripping off of me when I took my helmet off. I took a water bottle from one of the water girls and gave myself a quick shower to cool myself off and get the sweat out of my eyes.

"Alright, Spence, what do you see?" Coach asked.

I was pretty out of breath and had to force out a response. "We... we can beat that guy covering... Frank deep. We just need someone to... bottle up the safety."

"Send me deep," Tom said. "Frank will be wide open."

Coach nodded and drew up a play. We had to run back to get set or risk a delay of game. If we did make a catch in bounds, we had to run back to the line and spike it. Couldn't risk using the last timeout if we only got a two yard gain.

0:24 left in the game. One timeout. Score tied 24-24. Ball on our forty-eight yard line. Some people might say all of those numbers together was good luck. I'm not superstitious.

Frank was lined up on the far right side of the field, Tom in the slot to his left. Dwayne was in the backfield with me, but I sent him out to help block the right side of the line. If that end got free again, he was gonna get me like he did Justin.

I flexed my hands and took a breath. I called out my cadence and took the snap.

This time, the defensive backs were playing press coverage and held up most of the receivers. The pocket was starting to collapse and I had to make a move. Tom was bottled up and the safety wasn't taking the bait. He had the deep middle of the field covered tight. Frank, the beautiful bastard he is, saw this and cut back towards the center of the field so the safety wouldn't be able to cover both him and Tom at the same time. I gunned it into his arms right before I got knocked on my ass by one of the linebackers. He knocked all of the wind right out of

me. I desperately tried to look through the gaps in the line to see what happened. The cheers from our student section gave me hope that something good happened and I lunged to my feet, calling for the offensive line to run after me. We lost about eight more seconds getting set, but we still had a timeout.

0:09 left. One timeout. Ball on their thirty-nine yard line.

I stepped over toward the sideline to hear the play call. All he had to do was get as many yards as possible so Parkman could take a shot. We lined up with an Empty Set, no one in the backfield besides me. The defensive backs were playing press again. I noticed the middle linebacker step up as though he were going to blitz. I prepare myself to get rocked again.

The ball was snapped and the receivers legged it downfield. The linebacker charged straight into the center and began driving him backwards on a collision course with poor old me. I had to act fast so I sprinted out towards the left sideline, scanning the backfield for someone to get open. I had nothing, they were covering them too well. The little voice in my head said not to play the hero.

Deciding that yards were more important and seeing there was only five seconds left, I broke into a sprint towards the center of the field. I'm no Michael Vick by any means, but I can run when I need to. Since the defensive backs were playing man coverage on the receivers and the only linebacker on the field was presumably ten yards behind me, I sprinted for toward the center of the field where there was nobody covering, my eyes watching the clock in front of me so I could slide and call a timeout before we ran out of time.

3... 2...

BAM.

It felt like I was hit by a freight train. I learned after I got up that the middle linebacker had backtracked and caught up with me. The dude was a cheetah. I would watch the film over and over months after the game and I still didn't understand how he caught up with me like that after being so far in the backfield. Guy was going places if any colleges were looking at him.

Luckily, I held onto the ball and Coach called a timeout with one second left on the clock.

My whole body hurt. It was like I had a bad flu. But because the rule is that anyone who shows even a small sign of being hurt *must* sit out the next play, I stumbled to my feet. It took me a second to realize we called a timeout because I was aggressively limping to the middle of the field and desperately calling timeout, screaming for a ref to notice me. Frank had to escort me to our bench. I'd still be screaming out there if it wasn't for him.

"Great run, Spence, good fuckin' job," Coach Mullens said as he gave me a pat on the back.

"Thank you Coach." I winced when he hit me. It hurt like a bitch. I wasn't sure if I had a concussion or if I was just exhausted. Either way, I had to hold on for just one more play.

"Parkman, can you make it from here?" Coach asked our kicker.

Cody Parkman, despite being a Freshman, got the starting kicking job after Tucker Lewis graduated. Parkman was a bona fide star soccer player with a great leg. Unfortunately, he shook his head with a dejected look on his face. It would have been close to a fifty yard field goal.

“Alright, no worries. Old fashioned way, then.” Coach looked at me. “Remember that play you drew up earlier at dinner?”

My heart jumped for joy when I realized what he was talking about. It was the Super Bowl XL play. I nodded and he drew it up on a white board for everyone to see. I was confused when he made the following adjustments:

Frank would be the one taking the snap. I would be out wide, playing the wide receiver. Brad would be the one running down the field and cut through to the center of the field with everyone else running to the opposite side of the field, trying to draw heat off of him.

“See if you can catch ‘em sleepin’ and let someone get open,” Coach said. “If nothing’s there, just kneel down and take the tie. We can beat the bozos in the playoffs.”

It was the most convoluted play call and quite possibly the worst decision I have ever seen Coach Mullens make in my life. Despite my objections, I nodded and rushed the team back onto the field to avoid a delay of game. I knew it was all up to me.

The defense looked confused when they saw me line up wide, but they didn’t step up or anything cute. They were staying as deep as possible to avoid a Hail Mary play. Frank called for me to go in motion and I jogged towards him. The ball was snapped and he ran towards me. He handed it off to me and I *ran* with all my might towards the opposing sideline. I knew I’d never win a footrace against the linebacker spying on me from behind the line so I started looking downfield.

As I predicted, none of the defensive backs were stepping up to cover. They were waiting for our guys to go to them.

The linebacker ran around the edge and headed straight for me. Call me Ben Roethlisberger because I showed off some damn fine footwork making him miss the tackle. How I managed to evade him, I will never know. The guy reached out and slapped me in the leg as he fell to the turf, but I stayed up. I had tons of openfield around me and I checked downfield again.

That was when I saw him. Lined up with only one short little corner against him along the sideline, Brad was somehow managing to get wide open. If I threw the most perfect jump ball of my life, he would be able to leap over him and catch it with ease.

But then I glanced at the middle of the field and saw Frank starting to get open, racing toward a wide gap between the safeties and the defensive line where there was nobody for miles. If I threw to him, he’d probably never score, but we could always play keep-away. The safety in the center of the field, twenty yards away from Frank, realized I was eyeing Frank up like a fresh cut of meat at dinner and ran down to cover him.

Brad was waving for me. He knew I saw him. Our eyes met from forty yards apart. He knew this was his game to lose. This was my chance to win the game.

But then I remembered what Lauren and Kate and Beth told me. I thought about Ashley. I wondered why this piece of shit deserved to be a hero. It was the easiest touchdown pass of my life if he caught it, but he didn’t deserve to catch it. All these thoughts danced through my mind in the span of milliseconds.

I slowed up and took aim for Frank. My whole body was sore, but I knew this was our only chance. We could win it in overtime.

That was when the left defensive end broke off from the right tackle with a spin move and lunged at me. I hadn't seen a defensive lineman pull a move as perfect since videos of Lawrence Taylor in his prime. I was not ready whatsoever. I tried to throw before I got hit, but the guy hit me. Hard.

I watched the ball lazily fly through the air as I fell and crashed to the ground below. The ball, which would have been perfectly placed for Frank to catch on the run, soared over his head. Frank watched with horror as the safety who ran up to cover him picked it off and began sprinting towards me.

I was on the ground, but I willed myself to stand up. The defensive lineman tried to trip me up like a sneaky son of a bitch, but I avoided him and prepared to make a touchdown saving tackle. Everyone else was being blocked by the defensive linemen or was far too slow to ever have a chance at stopping him.

I was the only line of defense, the only one who could stop him.

The safety slowed up, baiting me into lurching forward and missing. I slowed down, too, and waited for him to make a move. As fast as he slowed down, he sped back up again and broke into another lightning-fast sprint. I sped up to match him. That was when he made a move and spun around me. I tried to reach out for him, but he was too quick and I wasn't taking a good angle. I ended up tripping over my own feet and fell flat on my face.

I could do nothing but watch as the safety walked into the end zone. I hung my head in shame, the little plastic pellets underneath the artificial grass filling my helmet as my facemask pressed into the ground. The home crowd was at a fever pitch. Air horns blew and blew. Fireworks even went off. Soon, the students were jumping over the barricades and rushing the field. I covered my head to avoid being trampled as strangers young and old ran around me to celebrate with the real hero of the day.

By the time I finally began to stand up, my legs felt weaker than melted butter. Everything hurt. I had never been so disappointed with myself in my life. I reflected on every bad decision that was made in the last twenty seconds. I could have run out of bounds before I got hit. I could have knelt down. I could have thrown the ball sooner to Frank. I could have just taken the sack and felt it the next day.

But I didn't regret not throwing to Brad. Not by a long shot. Fuck that and fuck him.

It was a long march back to the locker room. We all marched back together in one straight line. It was like an army being forced to retreat from battle, but the general wanted to make his men out to be proud despite the defeat. We were all heartbroken, no one more so than myself. I let them down. I let everyone down. It was my punishment to be at the front of the column, leading my men from the pasture towards the slaughterhouse.

We were expected to maintain some silence following a loss, especially after something like this. While Frank held the door, I stepped into the locker room and made my way towards my equipment bag. The clacking of cleats on the concrete floor echoed through the room, the

only noise that was being made. I collapsed back onto the wooden bench, my shoulder pads bouncing me off of the backboard.

The feeling of defeated peace was shattered when Brad stormed in and hurled his helmet at a locker. I almost jumped out of my shoes.

“This is *bullshit!*” Brad screamed.

Frank entered the room behind him. “Hey! Calm down!”

“NO! I was wide open! He *saw me!*”

When I turned backwards to see what was going on, we locked eyes. I knew something was going to go down. Either I was going to be the bad guy or he was. I was ready for either.

“I was *open*,” he screamed at me, taking a few steps forward. “You saw me! What the fuck’s the matter with you?!”

“Fuck you,” I murmured, my jaw clenched so tight that my teeth were grinding together.

“No, don’t you talk to me like that! Tell me why you didn’t throw it to me!”

“I said back off!”

I took a few steps toward him, ready to fight if it came to it. I was seeing red. If he said exactly the right wrong thing to piss me off any more than I already was, I was going to lose my shit. He would absolutely destroy me in a fight, but damn if I wouldn’t try to break his leg before I went down.

“Or what, pussy?!”

You’re gonna fucking die now.

“FUCK YOU!” I screamed, spit flinging out of my mouth. “Back off, you piece of shit, or I’ll kill you! Motherfucker!”

Brad had enough. He charged straight at me. I wasn’t ready for it at all. I thought he’d just throw a punch or something. Instead, I found myself getting slammed into the ground. If I wasn’t still wearing my shoulder pads, he might have broken my back. He did knock the wind out of me and I was gasping for air as he started throwing punches. He connected with a couple and made my vision go blurry. That was when the rage inside of me took over. I managed to spin him around. I don’t know how, but I ended up on top of him and started throwing punches of my own. I wailed on him over and over and over. I felt hands grabbing at me, trying to pull me off and hold my arm back.

Then I blinked.

And my hands were wrapped around his throat.

I pushed down onto his neck with all of my weight. My teeth were bared like I was a rabid dog. He tried to rip my hands off of him, but he couldn’t get the leverage to get me off of him. I felt arms start wrapping around me, trying desperately to pull me off. Brad was gasping for air, worse than I was after he tackled me.

I flew backwards onto my ass and a dozen people had to stop me from rushing forward to attack him again. Brad’s frantic breaths of air was the sweetest noise I ever heard in my life. I wanted nothing more than to choke the life out of his disgusting body. I still can’t believe it took no less than a dozen people to keep me down.

“WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?!”

The sound of Coach Mullens screaming snapped me back to reality a bit. Not enough to stop trying to fight through the people holding me down, though. I was running on adrenaline. Adrenaline and pure, unfiltered hatred.

“You bastard, I’ll kill you!” I screeched, my voice cracking like glass. “You goddamn RAPIST! I’ll fucking kill you if you ever come near me or Ashley ever again! Do you fucking hear me?! You RAPIST son of a bitch!”

Frank knelt down and grabbed onto my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. “Hey, hey, take it easy! Easy, man, it’s over! Enough!”

“Get him out of my locker room! NOW!”

Coach Mullens stared at me with pure contempt. Guilt consumed me. Not for what I did to Brad, but because Coach saw me. I knew I had lost him as a role model and a supportive face in my life. I didn’t want to make him angry. I just wanted to do what was right.

That was the moment I stopped struggling and let the guys hold me down so I could relax. Frank took me by the shoulder pads and dragged me to my feet. I took one last look at Brad before I exited the room. He was still gasping for air. His face was a tint of blue and purple and his throat was bright red, the marks from my fingers burned into his skin. He should have worn it like a badge of honor. He should have accepted what he was.

Frank and Tom took me out of the locker room and let me walk away under my own power. They looked mortified.

“Spence... what the fuck, man?” Frank asked.

“Son of bitch... that little rat fuck son of a bitch motherfucker! *Shit!*” I guess I wasn’t done yet. I had a lot of curse words to let loose now that I wasn’t out of breath.

“Dude, what did you say back there?” Tom asked.

“That piece of shit deserves to die,” I screamed. “He’s a monster!”

“Jesus Christ, calm down,” Frank yelled, trying to get through to me.

“Why did you call him a rapist...” Tom asked.

“Because he *is one!*” I screamed. I was begging them to see what I saw. “He tried to—”

Frank perked up and looked over my shoulder. “Not here, man. Come on.”

Frank led me away from the locker room and hurried off with Tom. I followed at the pace they set. I looked back to see what was wrong and I saw them. Dozens of people crept forward in a crowd to see what all the yelling was about. I wondered if they heard me say there was a rapist. Maybe something would be done if a lot of people knew...

I had to get out of there. I couldn’t go on the bus and I couldn’t stay here in the middle of this school surrounded by strangers. When we got somewhere away from the crowds, I sent Frank back to grab my stuff. Tom went with him and I sat on a bench outside the stadium. He eventually got back and gave me my stuff without saying another word. I didn’t have anything to say, though. I hated my friends seeing me like this. I wasn’t guilty about trying to choke out Brad. I was guilty that people I care about saw me do it. Especially Frank.

Ashley

It wasn't even ten minutes after the game ended and I was being swarmed by random people from our school saying that something happened with Spencer.

Everyone was in shock that we lost the way we did. It really stung to see Spencer so defeated after throwing the game-ending walk-off interception. He tried his best, but there was no way he was going to take that guy down. He was so fast. Anyone who said they know exactly what they would have done in that situation is full of shit. There's no way anyone could have made something work out of that situation.

After it was over and we got done watching the fans swarm the field, our student section made the walk of shame to the bus waiting for us in the parking lot. I decided to stay back for a bit with Kate to meet up with Spencer and wish him well. That was when word started to spread out about the fight like water spraying from a burst pipe. First it was just a small rumor spread by one anonymous assistant from the locker room.

Then it was the only thing people could talk about. And as his ex, I was the target of everyone's confusion and curiosity.

Kate had to help push through the mob to get away from them. I was so happy that I decided to drive up here. Being stuck on a bus listening to every single freshman ask me why my ex tried to kill Brad Kendrick wasn't my idea of a good time. Thank God I drove myself. After we cleared the crowd and got some room to breathe, my heart sank as the reality of what Spencer did really began to set in.

"We gotta find Spencer," I told Kate.

She nodded and we hurried off toward the locker rooms.

The team's tradition, following a win or loss, was to walk off the field together when they head back to the locker room and head back to the bus to go home. I figured the best place to find him would be on the pathway back to the bus. We'd never be able to get close to the locker room. And Brad was still there. I couldn't face him again. Not now.

We waited along the little gravel pathway, along with half the student section, for what seemed like an hour. I thought they snuck out the back door or something. When the door finally opened and the freshly-showered players began their march to the bus, they were nearly drowned in a sea of on-lookers trying to figure out what happened. Kate was more than happy to stay back and see if Spencer was with them rather than join the crowd. In the meantime, I continued to send text after text to see if he would tell me if he was okay. I could only imagine what would happen if Spencer tried to fight Brad. The dream usually ends with Spencer becoming a bloody skidmark on the pavement.

The team marched on in complete silence, everyone too scared to speak to the wannabe reporters getting the latest scoop. There was no sign of Spencer. Or Frank, for that matter. I took Kate's hand and we hurried back to the parking lot.

Lauren and Beth were waiting outside the bus for us. The chaperones looked livid that their kids weren't back so they could go home and enjoy the rest of their Friday night.

"How's Spencer?" Lauren asked.

As much as I hated to say it, I had to be honest with her. “I don’t know. People were saying something happened in the locker room and we tried to find him, but he and Frank must have snuck off.”

“Do you wanna meet up with us later?” she asked. “We were planning on getting dinner.”

I looked to Kate to see what she wanted. “I’m for it. Are you okay, Ash?”

“Yeah,” I finally said after accepting I wasn’t going to see Spencer again for a while. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll go. But I want to try to figure out if Spencer is okay so I might not stick around for too long if he needs me.”

“That’s alright, I understand,” Lauren promised. “I’ll give you a ride if she has to go,” she promised Kate.

“Any ideas where he went?” Beth asked. I shook my head. He still hadn’t answered his phone. I was really worried about him.

I felt horrible that I was leaving Spencer. I tried my best to reach out to him, but I told myself that *he* had to want to accept my help. Without him actually listening to me, I couldn’t do anything. I hated that I couldn’t do more. Lauren and Beth told the chaperones what was going on and we piled into my car to find somewhere to eat. I had my phone in the cup holder, desperately praying to a god I didn’t believe in that it would light up and Spencer would call me.

He never did.

Beth

To say I was livid was a grievous understatement. Not about the loss, I could care less whether this school's athletic program does well. I was livid about Spencer's actions. He had *one job* after coming clean about the attempted rape: Do. Not. Start. Shit. With. Brad.

All he had to do was keep his nose clean and keep up the charade of being his friend/teammate/brother/whateverthefuck until we could come up with a plan to take him down. I can't do everything by my fucking self.

Unfortunately, this was off the table now. Brad knew people were onto him. The entire team heard Spencer call him a rapist over and over, clear as day. I actually kind of respect him for not tucking his tail between his legs and running for the hills. Brad Kendrick was built like a firetruck. Fighting him of all people must have been brutal.

I took a deep breath and considered my options for dealing with the situation.

If I wanted to take down Brad, I would need to figure out how to do it without my involvement being known. Ashley was another story. I was a member of her inner circle so I could come and go as I wished, but Spencer was another story. I had to distance myself from Spencer. Anyone who randomly started hanging out with him could draw the attention of the rest of the school. He may have ruined his social life and possibly his football career, but he was in the spotlight more than ever before and it painted a target on all of his friends' backs.

I was trying not to scream in the car as we drove off to get food. I could not believe Spencer would be so selfish as to ruin hours of planning for one go at trying to murder Brad. I wish I could have seen it, as apparently it was a wicked fight. But it was selfish. And stupid.

This is why you can never trust a jock.

Spencer

Frank took me away from the stadium after everything was said and done. If I didn't have my emergency credit card, I wouldn't have gotten home. There was no way I'd be allowed back on the bus. When my ride showed up, Frank turned and walked back to the locker room. I had to endure a long car ride back to Arlington alone.

I had the driver drop me off a few blocks down from my house. The more I thought about it, the more I hated the idea of going home. Thinking of home made me remember that my dad was at the game. I forgot all about him. He never wished me good luck before a game or met up with me after it was over. I parked my truck in the school parking lot and had to drive myself home from games, home and away. He was nothing more than a casual observer, like any other Texan who just wanted to watch some football.

Between the game-losing interception and him inevitably hearing about the fight, I was so fucked. I couldn't bring myself to walk down the street.

Instead, I pulled out my phone and dialed Megan's number.

"Spencer?! What happened? Dad's flipping out!"

I shut my eyes and held my breath. I didn't know what to say. I was so sorry she got caught in the middle of all of this.

"Did he hurt you?" I calmly asked. All she had to do was say yes and I was going to end up in prison in the next few hours. I wouldn't regret the reason why, though. Not by a long shot.

"No, he's just looking for you. Where are you? What happened? Why's he so pissed?"

I exhaled sharply, all the tension in my body flowing out of me. I wasn't ready to kill my father. Not yet anyway.

"Just don't worry about it," I told her. "I'm fine, I promise. I'm gonna stay with a friend for a day or two. "But if he *does* do anything, you call me and I'll be there. I promise."

"Please tell me you're okay."

"I swear I'm okay. Please stay safe. Now get some sleep, it's late. Night."

"Night..."

I made sure not to say where I was gonna be staying. I didn't want Megan to be involved any more than she already was. I knew she wouldn't snitch on me, but I had to be sure. I wanted her as far away from me as possible right now. My face was still sore from earlier. Brad sure knew how to throw a punch.

My equipment bag was really heavy and my shoulder was sore after only ten minutes of lugging it around the suburbs. I was really thirsty and hungry and guilty over what happened. I know I shouldn't have let myself explode like that. Brad deserved it for what he did, though. I knew everyone was going to hate me now. My only hope was if the girls could prove he tried to hurt Ashley. At least people would understand why I did and said what I did.

After nearly two hours of mindless wandering up and down the neighborhood, I finally got my bearings and decided I needed to get somewhere for the night. I knew none of the guys wanted anything to do with me right now, even Frank, so that was off the table. I turned around and walked about twenty minutes to the only person I believed would take me in.

I knocked on Ashley's door, my bag resting at my feet. When she answered the door, I smiled at her. "Mind if I come in?"

She said she'd let me crash in her guest room. I thought the whole thing was very ironic in the worst way.

"I promised I won't sneak out tomorrow morning without letting you know ahead of time."

Despite the circumstances of the joke, she laughed and gave me a hug.

"I'm just glad you're okay," she said.

"Me, too." She smelled nice.

I passed out the second I fell down onto the bed.

Katherine

Dinner went well. We discussed the game for a little bit before Beth steered the direction of the conversation towards Monday. The topic was about the debate we were going to have to do. Beth made a little joke about bringing up the fight to show how quick-tempered he was, but quickly retracted and apologized when she read the room and saw nobody was laughing.

We did keep discussing the debate, though. Lauren was really nervous about the idea of public speaking. She was incredibly charismatic and easy to talk to, but she said she froze up bad when doing presentations for class. She said getting up on stage in front of thousands of people might make her cry.

"You have nothing to be afraid of," I promised. "They all love you."

"But would they still feel that way if I made a complete fool of myself?" she asked.

"Trust me, we've got this in the bag," Beth said. "Spencer doesn't stand a chance."

"I mean, he's still running..." Ashley said quietly. Besides that, she offered no resistance to the comment. She was beaten down. Broken.

Beth gave her a look. It said, plain as day, *He's finished. We've won.* I couldn't help but think that this might become reality. Regardless of what happened, Lauren was so much easier to support than Spencer and I'm saying that as someone who has been totally in love with him for ages. Spencer was an amazing guy, but he could be way too cocky sometimes. That whole stunt with the throne and the crown was really dumb. Plus there was the thing with Prom from last year that everyone talked about for weeks after it happened...

Lauren smiled to herself and said, "Holy shit, am I gonna win this?"

Beth put a hand on her shoulder and responded, "*We* are gonna win this. All of us."

She looked around the table at me and Ashley, who was not even trying to put up a fight in favor of Spencer anymore. I felt so proud to be a part of the team. I just knew this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship between the four of us.

On the ride home, Ashley discussed the situation with Spencer with me. I think it was her way of talking *about him* while not discussing the details of the fight or the party or anything involving the drama currently surrounding him.

To my chagrin, she specifically focused on my crush on him.

"He's probably not looking for anything serious right now," she said. "Considering everything going on. But if the topic of finding someone new ever comes up, I'll be sure to put in a good word for you. I don't know if he'll ever actually talk to me about that, though, so you're probably going to have to make the first move. Just... give it some time. Especially now."

I wrote down everything she said directly onto my brain, as stupid as that made me. I knew she of all people understood how Spencer's mind works and how I would best have a shot at getting with him. Of course I wasn't going to rush it, though. It was just a dumb crush on the hottest and coolest guy in school that every straight girl has at least once in their lives. I think. It's not like I wanted to have sex with him or anything, though. I just liked him. A lot.

For the time being, though, I was more worried about school right than anything else. Especially since college was only a year and half away. And Ashley. Especially Ashley.

“But if you *do* decide to rush things,” she said with a little grin, “he said he’d propose on the spot if a girl brought him roses and asked him to go out with him.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“He’s a sensitive soul.”

We both laughed.

When she dropped me off, I thanked her for the ride and she promised that she would talk to Spencer when things got a little better. I knew that wouldn’t be anytime soon, but I could wait. I hated the idea of getting my hopes up over this, though. Spencer was waaaay too popular to be seen in public with someone like me. But if Ashley was on my side, I thought there was even the slightest possibility of me having a shot.

But first thing’s first: help get Spencer out of the mess he was in right now.

Was I a bad person for thinking so much about being with him with everything going on at that point? Fresh off of a breakup and in the middle of the biggest controversy in the school in months? I still think so. Sure, Ash gave me her blessing, but I don’t know. I felt like I was propping him up on a pedestal or something.

Ashley texted me about twenty minutes after she dropped me off at home. She said Spencer was safe and was spending the night at her place. I was so relieved. She didn’t say why he was staying over, but she said he was going to be in the guest room for the night.

I was just happy he was okay.

Ashley

Was it a bad joke to tell after everything that went down at Spencer's house a week ago?
Yes.

Did I still laugh regardless of the insensitivity of the comment?

Yes, very much so.

Spencer showed up at my house sometime around midnight and asked for a place to stay. If I hadn't gone out with the girls for dinner after the game was over, I more than likely would have been asleep in my bed by the time he showed up. He would have been stuck outside and there wouldn't be anything I could do about it. Unless he put the ladder against my window and broke into my house. He used to do that whenever he wanted to sneak inside to have sex at two in the morning. He was romantic about it, always bringing me flowers and chocolate and sometimes a little wine that he somehow managed to carry up a rickety ladder.

In hindsight, it all could be seen as being very very creepy.

I reflected on my actions from the day before while I was lying awake in bed. I regretted all of my actions. I don't know what came over me. I felt like my body was being pumped full of adrenaline. My mind was racing the whole time. It was like I was doing coke, but I wasn't. It was weird. It happens sometimes. Yesterday was so embarrassing. I needed to apologize to Jason for what I tried to do. He didn't deserve it.

Spencer didn't find everything when he tore through my room. It didn't help that I did end up doing a line to take the edge off. It didn't.

The next morning, we sat down and discussed what was going on with his dad. I gently pushed him to open up a bit about a man I had only met once. He kept me at arm's length for a reason, but he never really discussed why. I didn't exactly "like" him based on that one interaction. Now I had reason to believe it was much deeper than an asshole father and his never-lives-up-to-extremely-high-expectations son.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you home?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. My Dad would kill me."

"Don't say that."

He sighed and held his head in his hands. "I need to get out of here," he said with deadly seriousness. "I need to get Megan and we just need to run. Just get the fuck away and go somewhere else. Far away."

I understood the feeling. Whether he said it to play to my recent mental episode or just said it because it had been on his mind for a while, I do not know. But I understood. More than anyone. And I knew it was a foolish dream for someone so young *and* underage.

"Where would you go?" I asked with genuine curiosity.

He ran his hands through his hair and smiled to himself. "Who cares? As far away from this shithole as possible."

"Speaking from experience, running away isn't all it's cracked up to be," I replied with a sad smile to match his morose grin. "It honestly kinda sucks."

“Except I wouldn’t stay around town. We’d be halfway to New York by the time anyone actually notices.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You wanna go to New York.” It wasn’t a question. I didn’t know how to say it, really.

“For Megan,” he stated. “She always wanted to sing on Broadway.”

She was a sweetheart. I’ve never heard her sing before so I can’t say whether she would make it in the brutal world of show business, but she had a good heart and I can tell she wants to make people happy more than anything. That has to count for something. Right?

“Yeah?”

“She got a copy of the *Heathers* soundtrack for her birthday and has it on repeat pretty much every day.” He chuckled. “I could sing that Candy Store song in my sleep at this point.”

“*Heathers* is off-Broadway,” I informed him.

“What’s the difference?”

I had to figure out how to translate it to someone who wasn’t into musicals or Broadway. I had my share of musicals that I was interested in. I made a note of remembering to discuss *Heathers* with Megan the next time we spoke. I’m sure she would love being able to talk shop with someone about it. Broadway is finally starting to gain a younger following, but I doubted she had a lot of friends who could go into detail about it.

“Broadway is like the NFL. Off-Broadway is... like NFL Europe.”

He looked at me with genuine surprise. “How do *you* know about NFL Europe?”

“I dated the high school quarterback,” I said proudly. “Had to study up.”

He smiled at me. I could see he was still worked up about everything. I doubt he slept much last night. I know he was supposed to have practice today, but he chose not to go. For obvious reasons.

“Do you want to stay here for a bit?” I asked.

“Would your mom mind?”

I instantly brushed the question off. “She’s away on a business trip. Again. But she wouldn’t care, she *adores* you. And besides, I still have some of your clothes you left here and I would very much like my room to be cleaned up.”

He thanked me profusely. It was such a little kindness, but I knew he needed it.

That was when I had to turn the direction towards the black and blue elephant in the room. I tried not to look at it but it was staring at me, plain as day.

“Did he do that?” I asked, gently pointing to his face.

He took a second to realize what I was referring to. When he did, he hung his head in shame, unable to speak. Even though his actions said it all, I needed to hear it so we could come to terms with it.

“Spencer... does he ever hurt you?”

He said nothing.

I pressed on, despite how uncomfortable the mood had become. “Spencer...”

“Yes.”

I stood and walked over to him. He held me and began to softly weep into my stomach. I rubbed his head and assured him it was going to be okay. No matter what happened, he would be okay. It might have been a lie, but it was a nice lie.

“You can stay here as long as you want. Megan, too.”

MEMORIES II

Beth

I was a very quiet girl when I first arrived at Arlington. Very shy. And lonely.

Even though the school had a student body numbering over two thousand, many of the people knew each other for most of their lives. The jocks were brought up in the bootcamp that were the JV teams back in middle school, with high school serving as the launching ground of their careers. The grade school cheerleaders held their little pom poms while the upperclassmen mentored them and showed them the most basic of dances. The nerds discovered their love of science and reading when they were rejected from the inner circles of the newly crowned “popular kids.”

Walking into this school for the first time was such a culture shock. I came from a private high school that had less than three hundred people. This new school was a hundred times larger than anything I’d ever dealt with before. The first day of classes was the first time I ever experienced an anxiety attack. I got written up for it because I wasn’t sure what happened to me and ended up missing second period because I was in a handicapped bathroom sucking down air that did nothing to fill my lungs. Great first impression, huh?

The first time I encountered the upper class of the school occurred later that same day, after I had run out of tears to cry. I was walking down the long hallways, being tossed around like a rag doll by the clusters of much taller and bigger people just trying to get to their classes or discuss the latest episode of TV or gossip about who screwed who over the summer. It was so claustrophobic at points, I thought I was going to be sick.

Someone bumped into me. Hard. I ended up spilling all of my books and papers all over the floor. A football landed on the ground beside my stuff. I couldn’t bring myself to look into the person’s eyes, but the letterman jacket confirmed it was one of the athletes, the real all stars of the school. I didn’t need to see the football to figure out it was one of the football players. And who says I don’t have the brains to be in the AP classes?

To my surprise, the boy actually owned up to his mistake and tried to help clean things up. “Hey, I’m really sorry about that,” he said softly. “Ball got away from me.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “Seriously.”

I knelt down to gather my things, trying to ignore the guy in front of me. I heard a chorus of laughter and jeers from down the hallway. Glancing up for a moment, I was met with a dozen other players pointing and laughing at me and the boy beside me. I quickly looked away.

“Come on, Spencer, hurry up!” one of the guys yelled. He turned out to be Frank Newman, though I wouldn’t learn his name until much later.

“Hey, cut him some slack!” another voice yelled out. “He’s just tryin’ to get laid on the first day! Give the guy a break!” Brad was the first boy in school that recognized me as a potential sexual partner for the guys to toss around like a dog toy. I never forgot that.

Frank stepped forward and knelt beside me, a wide grin on his face. “Is he bothering you, miss?”

I looked at him for a moment before grabbing my last book from the floor and hurrying away. "Bunch of assholes," I whispered to myself. I hoped they would hear me. I wanted them to know I was disgusted by them and never wanted anything to do with them ever again.

"I think our boy's in love," Frank said very loudly, hoping I would hear.

"She's got a nice ass," Brad called out.

Another chorus of laughter followed me. I had to get as far away from them as I could get without missing my next class or I'd be in serious trouble. I wanted to cry again. I couldn't do this for three more years. It wasn't worth it.

When I sat down in my Algebra 2 class, I forced myself to take deep breaths to calm myself down. I knew this teacher was apparently a hardass and wouldn't just let me leave within the first couple minutes of class, even if it was for another anxiety attack. Thankfully, by some miracle, we were allowed to choose our own seats. I got in early enough so I took the desk far in the back. I know the back of the room was usually saved for the burnouts and popular kids who wanted to avoid doing the work. I'm neither, but I was desperate to not have people behind me. I hate knowing someone was over my shoulder. Just knowing someone could be judging me without being able to do anything about it was too much to bear. I took the corner seat and entrenched myself in the little wooden desk with the countertop screwed in place. I had little room to move around and it only made me feel more constrained.

"Is this seat taken?" a voice asked. Her voice was very mellow and relaxed.

Without looking up, I shook my head and waved for them to take it. I knew the room was going to fill up soon so I figured it was best to have someone who actually bothered to ask if it was okay to sit beside me rather than someone who just took the seat and assumed I wasn't saving it for someone special. It's not like I had any friends. I was a thousand miles from home.

"I'm sorry about what happened out there," the girl said softly. "Those guys are such pricks. I wanted to kick the shit out of them."

I glanced over to see who was speaking to me. She was tall and slender. She had purple streaks in her hair. Not too much makeup. A little stud in her right nostril. A bunch of earrings. A very pretty face. She had a sort of early 2000's Avril Lavigne or Hayley Williams vibe about her. Really punk rock. Not emo, but not goth either.

"Oh. Thank you," I said as sincerely as I could given that I was trying not to cry.

"If those guys ever bother you again, let me know," she told me. "I'll deal with them."

"Okay."

She smiled at me. "You're new, yeah?"

"How'd you know?"

"The douchey answer is you look like a deer in headlights," she said with a little grin. "Truth is I work in the office. Student work program kinda thing, if that makes sense. We spend study halls doing paperwork and filing and other dumb stuff. We get credits for it and the office ladies bring food in every so often for us to eat. If you have any study halls you don't mind giving up, you should come by sometime and apply for a gig. Don't worry about getting rejected, I'll put in a good word for you and show you how it's done."

I couldn't believe a total stranger was being so nice to me. The cynic in me wondered if this was all part of some giant prank the guys were putting together. Why was this girl being so nice for no reason?

She must have seen that I was suspicious of her intentions. "Hey, don't worry, you're gonna fit right in around here. There's gonna be assholes, sure, but there's some good people here, too. Take it from me. I moved here from Washington two years ago. Now I have some amazing friends on the volleyball team and I couldn't be happier."

"You play volleyball?"

"Yep! And not too bad at it either. I could have become the Captain this year, but a bunch of the girls politicked to get Maria Lopez the job. Next year is probably going to be between Michelle and Lauren. They're really sweet, too. Especially Lauren. Like I said, you just gotta find the right people."

"Heh. Yeah, I'm no good at volleyball so I'm probably not going to fit in with you guys," I said with a meek smile. I hated talking to strangers, regardless of how nice they were.

"So? You don't *need* to play a sport to hang out with people from the team. Sure, we might spend a lot of time together during the day and after school and it might be the only thing we talk about whenever we're together and... what were we talking about again?" She laughed. She had a cute laugh. It was really infectious. "No, but seriously, we wouldn't keep someone from spending time with us just because they don't play a sport with us."

I felt like a total loser at that moment. It was like my Mother was giving me advice on how to be cool and make friends. I couldn't be a bigger social reject idiot if I tried. Nevertheless, she was very sweet and kept being encouraging.

"Wait, I thought only Seniors could be Captains." I was only a Sophomore at the time.

"Let's just say math isn't my strongest class." She shrugged and laughed it off. I sucked at math, too, so I could relate. "Which lunch do you have?"

"Um, third, I think."

"Hang on, lemme think for a second..." she said after thinking it over. "Um... I'm there. Lauren is. Sarah, Tess, Wendy. There's a whole bunch of the girls in there. You won't be alone with the guys." She perked right up. "Come eat lunch with us today! Don't worry about just randomly showing up. I'll put in a good word for you when I see them next period. I'm sure they'll be cool with you hanging out with us. Just don't forget who got you in with the cool kids." She finished her sales pitch with a wink.

I blushed a little and thanked her. I had nothing to lose so why not go for it?

"By the way, what's your name anyway?" she asked. "I heard there was a new transfer kid from out of state, but I never got the chance to look up the name. We get so many new faces around here, it's really hard to put a name to a new face."

"Beth. Hill."

"Nice to meet you, Beth Hill." We shook hands. She had this kind of beautiful sarcasm to her. Like she really couldn't give a shit about what the world had to say about her. It was so refreshing. I needed someone like that in my life. "I'm Grace. Grace Carlisle."

Spencer

I felt really bad for knocking that girl over. I normally have better hands than that. It was my fault for losing control of the ball and running her over. She was so small, there was no way I was going to see her and if she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, I'd be astounded. I could have crushed her if I ran at her full force. Brad would have turned her into a pancake.

As she hurried off after the guys made a fool of me and her, I wanted to call out and apologize again. I wouldn't be able to since the guys were tearing me a new one, though, and I doubt she wanted to talk to me.

"I think our boy's in love," Frank said with a grin, pinching my cheek.

"She is kinda cute," I said. She was so it wasn't a lie. More of an adorable cute than a sexy cute. But Brad wasn't kidding about her ass. She seemed extremely sad, though. It was kinda depressing to see her fumbling around with her books.

"What happened to Ashley?" Brad asked.

"Dude, give it up, she's not interested," I groaned.

"*Dude*, she's smokin' hot! You gotta go for that!"

Brad wasn't wrong. Ashley came back from summer vacation looking ten times hotter than she ever was before and every guy in our class decided to go through puberty a second time, all wanting something she had no interest in giving up. After that, she was always the single-hottest girl in our grade. All the other girls quietly resented her for it. Even the upperclassmen could be caught staring at her when they thought they were being sneaky.

"Who's smoking hot?"

We all turned to witness the return of the conquering hero.

Fresh off of our victory in the scrimmage on Saturday afternoon, our dear leader Charles Bruxton sauntered up and began his routine of shaking hands and embracing everyone from the team that was in the group he invited himself into. He told me once that he wanted to make sure everyone felt special and noticed. He said I should do the same next year when I became Captain. I took the advice to heart.

At his flank was his self-anointed bodyguard, Bruce "The Moose" White. He was our starting nose tackle at the time and he lived up to the nickname. His player profile had him billed at 6'6" and 240 pounds. I think he was even bigger. The guy was getting offers from across the country, but he never shared it. He was more of the strong, silent type that kept his feelings to himself. Where Brad was quiet when he wanted to be around outsiders, but loud and boisterous when he was with the guys, Bruce was a stone wall. He was a three-time All Conference player on defense and he was looking for his fourth award that season as well as his first State Championship. After three years of hard work, he deserved it.

"Ashley," Tom said with a grin before giving me a little sideways glance.

"Ashley Williams," Charles said, admiring the name. "She's a pretty one. But a *little* young for me so somebody else is gonna have to take care of that."

We all did our duty and smiled and laughed and enjoyed the joke, even if it wasn't really all that funny. He didn't expect us to pat him on the back and get on our knees to kiss his ass, but he very much enjoyed the attention. He wasn't a diva by any means, though. Not by a long shot.

"Alright, alright," I relented, especially now that Charles was involved. "I'll talk to her again. But no promises, she really doesn't seem like she's interested in me."

"Hey, love isn't a sprint, it's a marathon," Frank oh-so-wisely informed us.

"You're a real wordsmith, Franklin," Charles complimented. "I'm very excited to hear your big speech for the big debate. A lot is riding on you, you know."

Frank proudly scoffed. "Like I would ruin your chances. You're gonna become *President*, man! Nobody stands a chance against you!"

For some reason, Frank actually took this student government crap seriously. I figured out pretty quickly he just wanted a place for us all to hang out and talk about girls and do nothing productive. Charles being in charge would be icing on the cake. The idea of being in charge of the school intrigued me, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to do all the work that came with it.

"Should we be worried?" Brad asked. "Is there any serious competition?"

"Who else is even running?" I asked.

"I'll have to ask Mr. Hardy," Charles said. "I don't really know."

"We should figure that out soon," Frank advised. "Get ahead of them before they can start getting votes."

Charles scoffed and brushed his words of wisdom off. "Yeah, yeah, we'll worry about that later. We got a dodgeball game to worry about first."

Everyone grinned, knowing what was to come. We made sure to let the Freshmen on the team know not to volunteer to play early on. They might be Freshmen, but they were with us so they got special protection. No need for them to ruin their social lives by letting them get smothered by the Seniors in front of the entire school. Even the dorky ones who were probably going to either be cut before the start of the next season or quit before this season ends.

We packed our things and headed for class when the bell rang, ushering in the start of Sophomore year. I had a good feeling about this one, especially now that Charles was going to be in my corner.

Ashley

Summer came and went so quickly, I thought we never even left school to begin with. I made a deal with my Mom that I wouldn't need to work the summer between my Sophomore and Junior years, but I would have to get a job before my Senior year if I wanted to get a car, which she would help pay for in the meantime. As much as I didn't want to give up my summer working some shitty retail job or waiting tables, I *really* wanted a car. Juniors and Seniors were allowed to park their cars in the parking lot so I'd be part of the exclusive group allowed to drive myself to school.

The deal also worked out because I got to spend all summer with Lauren.

Lauren and I were nearly inseparable for three months. Besides cheerleading and volleyball practice, we spent as much time together as possible. It wasn't just sex either. Sure, there was a lot of it involved, but we also went on a lot of dates and road trips and stuff. Technically, the road trips weren't exactly "legal" because neither of us were eighteen and there wasn't an adult in the car, but we were careful to not get caught. I basically taught her how to drive even though I only had a learner's permit. My dad had been teaching me since I was eleven. The separation really cut into my private driving lessons. Part of me was glad he was gone now. Me and Mom could manage just fine.

On the last Saturday night of the summer, the beginning of the end before school started up again the following Monday, we decided to go out. One last date before our world went back to normal. I ended up skipping cheer practice just so we could get the entire day together. I said that my parents were taking me out and I had a feeling it was to discuss their separation. Kara understood, but I knew Stacey, Brooke, and Elena were pissed. My parents could have died in a fire and they'd still be mad I was ditching them. Whatever. Their problem, not mine.

We went to the lake to swim a little, then went to get lunch, then drove south and just kept going. We took my Mom's car for the trip. She was away for the weekend and left the car behind in the event I needed it. We made an agreement that I could drive it so long it was "absolutely an emergency" and if I paid for gas to replace what I used. It was an emergency of love that compelled me to steal the car.

The day was amazing. It was absolutely amazing. No notes. If we were a few years older, I might have proposed when it was over. Lauren made me happier than anyone in my whole life. We were gone for the whole day and the positive energy never went away. We ended up spending well over \$200 on food and gas and snacks and clothes and other things we didn't need but absolutely had to have. When I pulled back into my driveway, the back of the car was full of bags and wrappers from food we ate on the drive.

The kiss she gave me when I turned the engine off... I'll never forget it. Never.

There's three kinds of kisses you will have in life, assuming someone loves you enough actually to kiss you. First are dutiful kisses you give your spouse before leaving for work. Emotionless and unfeeling. Next are the passionate kisses you share when you're about to have sex or after it's over and you're sharing that sweet mutual bliss. Something special and tender. And then there's this. The kind that says you're more in love than you could ever be with

someone else. The kind you would only share with someone you want to spend the rest of your life with.

Some people will say I was naive for falling so hard for someone when I was just fifteen. I think they're full of shit. Taylor wasn't bullshitting with that song from her first album. We might have been young, but we knew we loved each other. I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else. I still don't believe I ever will. Holding her chin with my left hand and resting my right hand on her lap as we leaned over the cupholders to kiss just felt so right.

When we pulled away, I was seeing stars. I couldn't wait to get upstairs. Thankfully I remembered to lock the car up because we didn't even bother bringing in our stuff. We had one thing in mind and we were drawn to it like moths to a flame.

After we were done, we cuddled and whispered little compliments and giggled at each other's jokes. At one point, as we were preparing to drift off to sleep in each other's arms, Lauren held my cheek and said words that haunt me to this day.

"I'll never leave you. I promise. I love you."

Like I said, if we weren't so young, I would have proposed on the spot. She's the only person I can ever truly love. I can be a horrible person to anyone, but not her. Never her. The thought of hurting her was so alien to me at the time, I would have strangled anyone who said we wouldn't work out together.

When we awoke the next morning, we picked up right where we left off. Kissing and hugging and getting food and relaxing together. By the time Lauren told me she had to go home, it was like a knife was being jabbed into my chest. We wouldn't get another weekend like this for a long, *long* time. We knew this. We would have to love from afar as the societal norms we had grown accustomed to hiding away from worked their way back into our lives.

One conversation we had halfway through the summer was the prospect of coming out together. We went through our list of friends individually to judge how they would react. After some debate, we came to the conclusion that none of them would mind or judge us and would only be supportive of our relationship. The guys might make jokes at first, but once they understood we figured they'd be fine. What worried us was how the student body at large would react. Most of all, though, how their parents would react.

Lauren was on track to become the Captain of the Volleyball Team during our Junior year, something that never happened, while I had a real chance to become Captain of the Cheerleaders once Kara graduated. We couldn't imagine how the PTA would feel about two of the major athletic programs being led by gay students.

That was what scared us most. The unknown. The fear of what *could* happen versus what we know *will* happen. We wouldn't lose friends or anything. Maybe. I hoped not, anyway. But there would be bullying. Online, in person, behind the scenes, it makes no difference. People would judge. Guys would ask us to kiss in front of them to prove ourselves. Girls would be assholes and not want to get changed around us in the locker room. It was inevitable. We didn't want to become a headline in the newspaper or the subject of a FOX News report meant to demonize the community even more or be the faces behind lawsuits against the school because

of targeted harassment from administration and parents. My Mom's firm would be more than happy to take the school down for us. I know she would do anything for me. But coming out to her was another checkbox I had to eventually cross off and being forced to tell her because people were bullying me and my girlfriend at school was not how I wanted to go about it.

So we agreed to stay quiet about our relationship. To love from afar. We would consider telling our inner circle of friends sometime, but it wasn't on our radar anytime soon. Besides, we liked the secrecy aspect of our relationship. We didn't need our friends to wonder where we were and just assume *Oh, they're probably just hooking up back at Lauren's place*. I mean, it was probably true, but it still would have been really inappropriate to think.

After I dropped her off at her place, I'm not ashamed to admit I cried a little. Not because the two days of fun were over, but because I knew things had to go back to normal again. I was like a winter coat when the snow finally melted and the blossoms began to bloom and the grass began to grow. Back in the closet, I went.

School opened the next morning and everyone was happy to see their old friends again. I approached Michelle and Lauren as though I hadn't seen them in ages, all smiles and joy to see my old friends. Casey and Heather ran up to hug us and we all complimented each other's outfits. Even though all of us hung out together a couple weeks ago, Casey and Heather are on the squad with me, Lauren is my girlfriend, and Lauren and Michelle have been best friends since they were eight, we played pretend and acted as though we hadn't seen each other in years.

That was my favorite part of school growing up. Coming back from summer vacation and seeing everyone for the first time in a while. Seeing who had growth spurts and who got glasses and who started dressing really slutty and who got buff and who got fat. It was like meeting all these people again for the first time. Everytime someone changes on the outside, their personality changes, too. School itself sucks, but seeing my friends again made it worth going back. For a single day, anyway.

We made plans for getting together sometime later in the week and going to Charles' big party after the first game of the season. It was apparently going to be one of the biggest parties of the year, a feat he intended to live up to and break multiple times throughout the year as he had done last year as well. According to Frank, Spencer was going to ask me out at the party. This was something people had assumed would happen for most of last year, but my open desire not to date anyone pushed him away. It was really just a rumor I spread so I could avoid the inevitably awkward rejection of a guy I'm sure someone else was a perfect fit for, but I personally was unavailable to be with because of my lack of physical attraction to men and also my relationship with Lauren.

Being in a relationship is kind of a minor roadblock to being in another one. At least if you aren't either in an open relationship or aren't a cheating asshole. I've never given much thought to polygamy. I'm sure it has its ups and downs.

I had known Spencer for a couple years and he was nothing like he was in middle school or even Freshman year. He was a lot less nerdy and socially awkward. Spending time with the popular guys must have changed him for the better. He wasn't toxic or sexist or anything like

some of the other guys could be, thankfully. He had been molding into the “Future King” role quite well. With Charles’ looming graduation and promotion to college ball on the horizon, there was a major hole that needed to be filled. Spencer was turning out to be quite the leader. With Charles as his mentor, he was going far.

That being said, I had net zero interest in dating him. I was more than happy with Lauren. I’d let him down easy if he asked, even if it would cause a massive scandal that would rock our school. Imagine turning down the starting quarterback and being the subject of controversy and drama and ridicule. Imagine being labeled a prudish ice queen because you rejected a single guy.

High school is so fucking stupid.

Lauren

The first game of the year turned out to be the greatest game of my lifetime.

The crowd sat in stunned silence after the horn blared for the final time. No one had ever seen anything like this before. As the team celebrated on the field, the crowd stared at the scoreboard, trying to make sense of what they were seeing. No one dared speak, as though making a single noise would wake us from this collective dream. To be fair, we had spent the whole game cheering so our voices were pretty much shot. I come from a family of football fans, but this is the kind of thing you don't see outside of a video game.

FINAL SCORE: Austin Prep 72, Arlington 97

Spencer basically became a high school football god on that day.

SPENCER BARNETT: 51/67, 811 Yards, 13 Touchdowns, 1 Interception

We found out after the game that Spencer had set the Texas state record for passing yards *and* passing touchdowns in a single game. And Spencer was only a Sophomore. He still had two years to somehow beat his own record and make sure no one ever has a chance of beating it. As if anyone actually could.

Charles also had impressive stats that were lauded by the team and the media in the days following the game.

CHARLES BRUXTON: 17 Receptions, 421 Yards, 7 Touchdowns

Charles did not end up setting any records, though he did finish with the *second* most receiving yards in state history with his performance. Despite his not having any state records, he was elated that Spencer came through and ended up making history. He praised him during interviews and said he was the future of both Arlington and professional football.

If I were a reporter writing a headline for my summary of the game, it would read something flashy-yet-simple that explained the overarching story of the game in a nutshell:

WHAT THE FUCK IS DEFENSE?

Spencer was heralded around the nation as possibly becoming the greatest high school quarterback of all time. The media loves to throw around the "GOAT" moniker to anyone who is good at their craft, but Spencer *earned it*. If he kept up even a fraction of this skill level throughout the rest of his time in school, he'd become a legend. And this was only the first game of the season. He still had so much left to offer. I was so proud of him. We all were.

Charles' party, as predicted, ended up being the greatest party ever thrown. Spencer was paraded around the room like a married couple at a Jewish wedding. As goofy as it was to watch them carry him around on a cheap plastic lawn chair, he deserved it. If anything, he should have been in the throne they had Charles sit in during Pep Rallies and other events in the gym. Everyone was going to be blackout drunk by the end of the day, myself included. Ashley and I got absolutely hammered and spent the night out with our group of friends.

Everything was just so right.

If only I had known how badly things would turn out as the year went on.

Beth

While the rest of the school crowded into the stadium to watch Spencer become a hero, I chose to stay home and spend the night alone with my thoughts. I didn't mind. Sometimes it's better to be alone.

My phone lit up around 8:30. It was a message from Grace.

Grace and I had become actual friends after our brief introduction in math class. We bonded over a shared love of Paramore, dark comedies, and being the outsiders in the school. Like myself, Grace had transferred to the school when her family moved to Arlington, though she had been here a few years more than me. I had moved to the city from Pennsylvania, Grace and her family had come from Seattle. I asked her what it was like to make a pilgrimage back home on the anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death so she could mourn with her own people. She laughed and told me to fuck off.

I knew early on we were going to become fast friends.

Grace had been here since eighth grade, but she still was a bit of a loner with few real friends. She tended to avoid the big school events, regardless of how much it would have boosted her social standing. She only went to the Homecoming game her Freshman year because her friend, Shannon, dragged her to it. Shannon moved away after Freshman year and kinda dropped off the face of the earth. Now Grace only went to Pep Rallies because she was threatened with detention and even then only showed up to the outdoor ones so she could hide under the bleachers in the stadium and smoke weed. She offered me some when we first hung out together outside of class. I politely declined.

After the first game of the season, the one that propelled Spencer Barnett to national stardom and put him on the radar of every college football promotion in the country, things changed drastically. Before the game, football was a big part of the school and everyone was just kinda involved. Now, though, you couldn't escape it. The teachers high-fived Spencer and Charles as they entered classrooms, for god's sake. All people talked about in the cafeteria was football, football, football. They weren't talking to me, sure, but I could hear them. It was nauseating. All that happened throughout the week was football related.

This was when I first got introduced to high school politics. Everyone knows about how class division and cliché culture divides schools, but nobody understands *why* they are a thing. People who pose as altruists that act like they love everyone and want to support everyone and show their sense of unity and community and all that meaningless bullshit is just that: bullshit. They don't care about everyone. They just do it for the clout like sad Internet personalities that rely on goodwill and positive PR to promote their brand. This is why politics in high school are a thing. People want to seem like they care. But they don't. They never did.

Grace taught me that all too well, intentionally and unintentionally.

The third Monday of the year was the date of the debate and the election. It had been since the student government was established many many years ago, according to Mr. Hardy. We were gathered like sheep and ushered into the auditorium to listen to the candidates give their

reasons for why they deserve to be in the positions they were running for. Grace sought me out beforehand so we could sit together and make fun of the whole thing together.

We all knew it was nothing more than a popularity contest. The only time someone who wasn't an athlete, hedge fund child, or just overall generic popular kid won the Presidency was some guy named Rick Mendow who won the position after giving away free weed to people for the job. He was stripped of the title when his opponent snitched on him to the principal at the time. Rick ended up getting expelled, his Cabinet was removed from their positions, and his opponent was given the job for free. There is still "In Memory of Rick" graffiti being drawn in bathroom stalls despite Rick being expelled back in 2005. I only know this because Grace knew someone whose older brother was in his class. Nobody around here knows what a Rick Mendow even is, yet they still carry his legacy on through bathroom commemoratives. Rest easy, sweet prince. The brightest flames burn twice as fast.

As we sat down in the gym together, Grace pointed out a girl to me. "See that girl down there? The cheerleader?" she asked. She was sitting all the way down in the first row. I know I had seen her around before, but we had never spoken. I nodded. "That's Ashley Williams."

I chuckled. "Okay? What about her?"

Grace lowered her voice so only I could hear. With the collective murmur from the crowd, I had to lean in close. She smelled nice. "She's totally fucking Lauren Bradshaw. That one right there, a couple seats over. See her? The blonde?"

I looked down to see who she meant. I saw a tall, slender girl with long flowing blonde hair just like Grace said. She was looking at her group of friends, oblivious to our stares. She had a pretty smile. Besides that, I thought nothing of her or Ashley or any of the other girls in their group. They never talked to me so why should I care about them?

"Really?" I asked.

"Totally." Grace smiled. "I overheard Ashley dirty talking over the phone with her yesterday when she was in the locker room. Lauren didn't have practice, but Ashley did. I guess Lauren was *reeeeeeally* lonely."

"Why were you hanging out in the locker room?" I asked.

It was the only thing I could think of asking. Knowing they were doing that was... okay? I guess? It didn't exactly affect me one way or the other. Sure doing that stuff at school was weird and all, but it's not like every guy in here didn't beg their girlfriends for nudes when they were alone. What made them any different, except maybe the hardware they were using.

"My guy stashes my pot in there," she said casually. "Loose brick in the fourth stall."

I really didn't know how to respond to this information either. "I promise I won't steal from you," I said. She laughed. She had such a cute laugh.

The lights dimmed to silence the crowd and the beloved our principal Mr. Patrick took center stage. He was a large man, though rather short, and he spoke with that stereotypical Southern drawl. He sounded like he could be Sandy Cheeks' grandfather.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said with a warm, inviting smile, "I hope y'all are enjoying the beginning of the new school year. I can't believe it's already been two weeks and we're

headed strong into week three. It's been an amazing start to the year, both athletically and academically, and I can only see this year continuing to go up from here."

Grace looked at me and made an enthusiastic jerk-off hand gesture. I covered my mouth and suppressed a laugh. We got a few confused looks from people around us. It only made us want to laugh harder.

"For the past two weeks, you fine students have been exposed to the wonders of the democratic system and how it functions on a local level. All the campaigning and signs and little speeches given around campus have been wonderfully excitin'. Today is the culmination of two weeks of work where one lucky boy or girl will become the leader of your student body. I'm sure you know the names of the people running, but today will serve as a reminder of the people you share these hallowed halls with."

President Patrick proceeded to read off the list of students running and the positions they are running for. I knew I was either going to not vote or just vote for the least toxic person on the list based on what little knowledge I had of the candidate. My vote wouldn't matter, though. I knew who was winning before Grace and I walked into the room.

"I guess we should start with the star of our football team," Principal Patrick said with a smile that gave away his bias. "First, a foreword from your quarterback, Spencer Barnett!"

His clap ushered in a thunderous boom of applause and support from our classmates. The room shook as two thousand kids showed their love for their record-breaking quarterback. Grace and I stared at each other with a look of fear that the bleachers were going to collapse from everyone jumping around with excitement. Spencer entered from stage left wearing this buttoned-up long black trench coat, waving to the crowd and motioning for them to get louder, a request they took to heart. The yelling turned to screams of support. I swear I saw a girl pull her top up to give Spencer a good look. She was taken away by two extremely angry female teachers before I could see what he did.

"*Helloooooooooo Arlingtooooooooooon!*" Spencer was the happiest boy alive at that moment. He was soaking in the admiration from his peers like sweet wine. "Dang, I can tell you're pretty happy to see me!" he said with a laugh.

"Oh, God, this fuckin' guy," Grace said flatly. I shushed her, barely able to keep myself from laughing.

"I'm gonna keep this short because I'm not the most important guy in the room here. The real star here is my friend and the Captain of *your* football team. Someone who has spent three years of my life making this school a better place. A guy who has given everything he has to put our school on the map. And the guy who is gonna lead our school to a State Championship!"

The idea of our school winning a State Title sent the crowd into a frenzy. From what I learned later, our school hadn't won a Championship since the school was a 4A school back in 1995. Since the conferences continued to expand and more divisions were added, the school was pushed further and further down the rankings, only ever making it to the second round of the playoffs a few times before getting eliminated. Spencer and Charles were regarded as the duo needed to finally get the school a win.

“So,” Spencer went on, awkwardly grabbing at his jacket as he talked, “without further ado... Hit the music!”

It was possibly the most cringe-inducing thing I have ever witnessed in my life. The lights were turned down and loud music began to echo through the room. I later learned it was the song *Voodoo Chile* by Jimi Hendrix and the whole thing was a reference to a professional wrestling faction from the late 90’s. Spencer ripped his trench coat and revealed a black shirt with the initials of the high school written in white letters. The rest of the team stood up from around the auditorium and tore off their jackets and hoodies to reveal matching shirts.

The whole thing was very well organized and was equally mind-numbing.

Despite the stupidity of it all, the crowd ate it up. They were hooting and hollering and having the time of their lives. I audibly groaned loud enough for Grace to hear and break out into audible laughter, drawing the ire of the people around us. She gave them the finger in response.

Charles sauntered onto stage, arms raised out to his sides. He let the applause wash over him. He was like a plant absorbing sunlight. The more the people gave him, the prouder he became.

The rest of the leaders of the team came out to meet Charles: Spencer, Frank, Brad, as well as Seniors Diego, Trevor, and Manny. They were joined by a few of the leaders of the cheerleading squad: the captain of the squad, Kara Alderman; the heir-apparent to the squad, Ashley Williams; the co-captain Kylie Washington; and Charles’ girlfriend, Francesca Phelps. They formed a straight line directly behind Charles, who stood tall as an oak at the podium. Frank must have stepped off at some point because I didn’t see him with the others.

Charles waited for the applause to die down and for the music to fade out. It took minutes. He turned to blow Kara a kiss before finally speaking.

“Thank you, all, for that kind introduction,” he said with the most fake political smile I have ever seen in my life. “And thank you, Spencer, for coming up with that entrance. While it may have been a little over the top, you sure outdid yourself. Let’s give another hand to our *starting quarterback*, everybody!”

Spencer sheepishly smiled and gave small waves to the crowd as they cheered him on once again. I was ready for this to be over before it even began.

“Spencer put it best during his speech,” Charles went on. “I’m here to fight for *you*. And what will I do if I’m elected? I’m going to do the exact opposite from what regular politicians do and I’m going to *guarantee* you something. I’m going to *guarantee* that Arlington City High is going to need a bigger trophy case because...”

He took the microphone and stepped out from behind the podium. Frank pushed in a glass case on wheels. It was a trophy case, though the pedestal inside was empty.

“Once I’m your President, my goal will be winning the State Title and putting it back where it belongs... Right. *HERE!*”

He aggressively pointed at the trophy case and grew more and more intense as he spoke. He pumped his fists and brought the crowd back up to a hurricane of enthusiasm. Francesca

stepped forward and gave Charles a kiss. They held hands as the crowd cheered and the band played them off the stage.

That was it. There was no talk of dances or food drives or acts of service or better lunch foods or after school activities. All he had to do to win the school's favor was remind them that he was a star football player. And it was all it took.

After the "debate" that featured three other competitors was over, we were ushered back to our homerooms to vote. I folded my ballot up immediately and tossed it in the box. I didn't care about any of these people. All upperclassmen I didn't know made no effort to win my vote. Why would I waste a dab of ink on them when they have done and will do nothing for me?

In the middle of our end of the day study hall, the P.A. clicked on and Principal Patrick's gravely voice woke up anyone who was enjoying a nice nap.

"Attention, students. The time has come for the results of the vote." He proceeded to go from the Freshman candidates all the way up to the Seniors. I was positively wetting myself with anticipation. "And finally, the moment you've all been waiting for... your new President is... Charles Bruxton! Congratulations, Charles, and let's go Tornadoes!"

Grace and I made fun of the whole thing back at her place later that day. We had begun hanging out at her place almost every day to do homework. We almost never actually did work. We spent most of the afternoon gossiping about the school. I checked the clock. We'd been talking for two hours straight. This wasn't even the longest conversation we ever had. Our longest to that point was six straight hours. We did not finish our math homework that night.

"Who sells you weed, anyway?" I randomly asked while we were sprawled out on her bed. She was busy rolling herself something to smoke.

"You wouldn't know him," she passively responded.

"Probably," I admitted. I still didn't know ninety-five percent of the school.

"Why? Did you want some?"

I smiled. "I was told to avoid peer pressure and just say no when my friends offer me drugs. This is the third time. I think I need to talk to my mom about staying away from you."

"Who's offering you free pot? You'd be paying for it, bitch," she said with a grin as she lit up. I gently moved away from her so she wouldn't blow any smoke around me. I ended up getting some minor contact high from her smoking around me a couple times. Nothing too major, thankfully. I hated the feeling of losing control of my mind. It's the sole reason I never smoked to begin with. Or even really ever drank. "His name's Damien," she went on after exhaling a mouthful of smoke and coughing a little. "He's in your grade. Got kind of a school shooter look going. He probably loaned Spencer the trench coat."

"How'd you start buying weed from him?"

"He sells it to everyone," she said. "He's kind of the school weed guy. Never been caught. He's very discreet. Nobody would snitch on him, though. He's too useful."

"How so?"

She laid back and inched a little closer to me. She took another hit and thought over what she wanted to say before exhaling again. "He sells more than just weed."

“What? Like... coke?”

She laughed. “No, nothing like that. Kara would drive him out of business if he tried. Random stuff, I guess. Mostly tests. Old tests that the teachers never bothered to change the answers to. And essays. Book reports. He’s kind of a pawn shop. If you ever need something, I’ll put in a good word for you. He’s chill.”

“Interesting.”

“Who’d you vote for?” she asked, turning onto her side to look at me.

“It’s illegal to ask someone that.” She blew a puff of smoke in my direction and I waved it away with a notebook I had lying around. She giggled. “Nobody,” I admitted. “I don’t know any of them.”

“Me neither. Voting, I mean, obviously. I thought about doing a write-in, but they’d probably trace it back to me and get pissed off that I dared disrupt their precious *dem-o-cratic values* or whatever the fuck.” She did a very good impression of Principal Patrick’s southern twang. She already had a bit of an accent, though nothing too noticeable.

“Aren’t we just a couple of anarchists?” I mocked.

“I met you and I just turned evil.” She softly blew a puff of smoke in my face. It burned my eyes a little, but I didn’t mind. “You’re a bad influence. My mom warned me about people like you.”

“Yeah? What kind of people is that?”

We laid there and stared into each other’s eyes. Her lips were parted a little. I think I was feeling a little giddy from what she was smoking. And very relaxed. I thought neither of us would dare to make the first move even though it was right there for the taking. At least, I thought that would be the case. But without taking her eyes off of me, she reached back and placed the rest of her joint into an ashtray on her nightstand. She leaned forward and gave me the most passionate kiss of my life. It was also my first kiss. I will never forget it. I held her face and tasted the smoke on her breath and tongue. I was higher than she was.

When she pulled away, we both laughed like little kids and kissed again and again and again.

We wouldn’t have sex for another week. I was too scared to do it then, even though she was more than willing to teach me and swore she would be gentle. And she was. She treated me so gently that I cried afterward and she held me for nearly an hour before I finally let up. Not because it hurt or anything because obviously it didn’t. It was for the exact opposite reason. I had never felt closer to someone in my life.

After she took my virginity, she said she loved me. And I said I loved her, too.

And I did love her. I was in love so bad, it scared me. I had anxiety attacks over the thought of losing her. She was my first everything. I didn’t know anything about my sexuality before I met her. I never even thought of it, really. Even though everyone around me was doing it every single day with their little boyfriends and girlfriends, I never really thought about it at all. Even as I got into high school, it just wasn’t my priority. I worried about my body and if people would find me attractive like every other teenage girl, sure, but I never tried to make myself

appealing to any one person in particular. Grace didn't change for me or anyone else either and she never expected me to change for her. I respected her so much for that.

We became a couple that same day when she kissed me. We hadn't discussed if we were attracted to each other before then. It was all very spur of the moment and impulsive. We just realized we were into one another and just... went for it.

Personally, I had no problems with spontaneity. It may have been because she was so different from the other girls or because we shared so much in common or just because she was the first to accept me into the school, but she awakened something in me and I was so happy she did. We both kept our relationship secret, but we didn't mind. We didn't need the whole school learning about us anyway. We didn't need them to judge.

Grace and I dated in secret for over a month before the Homecoming Incident happened. If there was ever a moment that changed my life and molded me into the woman I am today, it was that. How could something so perfect be ruined?

ELECTION

Beth

The weekend flew by like a hurricane. Before I knew it, it was Monday.

D-Day.

Everything rested on what happened within the next few hours. The debate could change everything. If it was anything like the spectacle of last year, we were screwed. God, that was such a waste of time. Lauren was perfect beyond words, but even she couldn't beat every football player in the whole fucking school uniting behind their fearless leader and making a mockery of the *dem-o-cratic process* as Principal Patrick might say. Their united front was seemingly unbeatable.

Lucky for us this time around, cracks began to form in the foundation of the athletic program. Spencer was in hot water with the administration for his (alleged) outburst in the locker room. Alleged because the football team had been given a strict code of silence by Coach Mullens and Mr. O'Reilly, a policy that was broken when Tom blabbed to Casey and Heather the second they were all together. Brad had loads of heat for his being accused of being a rapist. The rumor was Frank and Spencer have not spoken a word to each other following the fight.

The football team as a whole were going to be forced to choose between two of their captains. Seeing this loving relationship fall apart at the seams was delicious.

When Lauren came over to my house on Sunday to prepare for the big day, we decided to be total girls and play dress-up. I had advised her to wear something special for the debate and election. Something sultry, but not slutty. Alluring and desirable, yet thoroughly unattainable. Something that would get anything with a pulse talking.

"So... be a Purple Dragon girl?" she asked.

"Exactly!"

When she came over, she was carrying a dress wrapped up in plastic and a shoebox. She told me to wait on my bed while she got changed in the bathroom connected to my bedroom. She said she would kill me if she caught me peeking. Knowing I absolutely would, she shot me a death stare before shutting the door behind her. I waited with my eyes closed like a dutiful girlfriend, trying not to imagine what could possibly be under the plastic.

Grace and I did this before the Snow Ball. She didn't want to go so I went over to her place to try on dresses and play pretend. It was the first time I saw her smile in months. We didn't end up going to the dance, though. After Homecoming, she never wanted to go to another dance again. So we sat around the house in pretty dresses with our makeup done perfectly and no one else got to see. It was just us. It was how it should have always been.

"Are your eyes closed?" I heard her call from behind the door.

"Yes."

"Don't lie to me, Beth, I'm serious."

"I'm not!" For once, I was being honest.

"You better not be," she warned.

"Just come out already!" I said while laughing.

I heard the latch on the door click and the door gently swing open. I waited patiently for the all-clear to open my eyes. I could only imagine she was sticking her head out to see if I was telling the truth. I held my tongue when the thought of asking her if she got lost entered my mind. This was her special moment.

“Okay, asshole, open your eyes.”

When I did, I was met with the most perfect sight of my life.

Lauren was not the type to doll herself up just for the hell of it. She rarely wore dresses, despite looking amazing in whatever she wore. She was much more of a t-shirt and jeans type. But when I opened my eyes, I saw her standing before me wearing this gorgeous blue dress. It had a frilly floral pattern around her neck and shoulders and stretched down just above her knees, the back stretching further down. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail with her bangs dangling lazily over her ears. When she gave me a little twirl to show the whole thing off, I saw it did not expose her back. It was extremely formal and would break no dress code violations. She later showed me the dress online. It was an *A-Line Scoop Neck Asymmetrical Chiffon Homecoming Dress* from a company called JJ’s House.

“Oh my God,” I said in a daze.

“Pretty, right?”

“You look...”

“Wait until you see what I got for Homecoming,” she said with a wicked grin. “You won’t be able to keep your hands off of me.”

“Is it the same color?” I asked. “This looks great, but you look so much hotter in red.”

She shrugged. “I guess you’ll have to wait to find out.” She winked.

“I hate surprises.”

“I can tell. You’re absolutely dying right now.”

After she was done flaunting herself, it was my turn to show off my new clothes.

I gave her no hints as to what I was wearing beforehand so it was all a complete surprise. For my outfit, I decided to go with something a bit more... untraditional. I needed something that would stand out, but would also compliment Lauren’s otherworldly appearance. That is why I placed an order for a custom-fitted tuxedo and dress pants weeks in advance, all on my mother’s dime, of course. I took care to ensure I did not put on any excess weight in the days leading up to the election. I refused to let two hundred dollars go to waste.

The truth is I do not mind wearing dresses. In fact, I sometimes even enjoy it. I do not actually mind showing myself off once and awhile. Hell, I already had a few ideas in mind for Homecoming that will knock Lauren straight on her ass. What I do hate is people overexposing themselves for constant attention. There is no reason to wear short shorts or belly shirts every single day. I have the same opinion with dresses. I can be just as bad as any other girl my age and swoon over dresses for hours and think about what I would look like in them, but I have self-control. I want the occasion to have meaning. Homecoming, Snow Ball, Prom, our wedding. I want them to be special. For myself and for her.

The tux was a simple decision. I knew Lauren would go with a dress because she wanted to turn heads. Hell, I even suggested she do it when we first discussed the idea of her running. I decided to shake things up a bit. Oh sure, a teenage girl in a tuxedo would cause controversy. I fully anticipated accusations of homosexuality or gender dysphoria or whatever other buzzword was making the rounds on Tucker Carlson's pathetic excuse for yellow journalism. Fuck them. I wanted to compliment Lauren's outfit with something head-turning of my own. Something formal and classy. Two girls showing up in Homecoming dresses would get us a lot of good publicity, but laughing at both the student body and the administration for overreacting to my choice of outfit was too fun a chance to pass up. Grace would have loved this stunt.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, after threatening to drown her in the bathtub if she even considered peeking, she perked up and had a smile from ear to ear. She was enamored.

"Don't you look dashing." Her eyes twinkled from the Christmas lights over her bed.

I tossed my chestnut hair out of my eyes with a flourish. "I know. I know. I'm hot."

"You're damn right you are. Holy shit."

I giggled and kissed her. I couldn't keep my hands off of her. I was careful to not ruin the dress, though. It was very pretty and she needed it for Monday. Grace would have looked amazing in it, too. The dress would have matched the streaks in her hair.

Ashley

Spencer had been staying at my house since he showed up late on Friday night and I was more than ready for him to go back to school. I loved the guy to death, platonically of course, but he really needed to get out of the house. And shower. He very much needed to shower.

He was awake before I was on Monday morning. I went downstairs to get something to eat after I showered and there he was on the couch, eating potato chips and watching TV. We went to the store on Saturday to get him a change of clothes. All he had was the extra undershirt he wore to the game before changing into his gear and some gym shorts.

"You sleep okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm good," he answered with a mouthful of chips.

"Nice breakfast you got there."

He offered me the bag. I politely declined.

"You're coming to school today, right?" He just kinda ignored me, focusing more on the show than what I had to say. "Spencer? Hello?"

He swallowed his awful excuse for a morning meal and sighed. "Ash, how can I go back? Seriously, after everything that happened?"

"I felt the same way after I ran away. But I managed. And I know you can, too. They should be thanking you for what you did. You kicked that piece of shit's ass for me."

He sheepishly smiled. "Yeah, well..."

"Has anyone reached out to you since the game?"

He shook his head. "Nobody that matters, anyway. Lots of random people who just wanted to see if I'd say anything. I don't even know how I got some of these people's numbers. Or how they got mine. But nobody from the team."

"Give them time," I assured him. "They'll come around."

He quietly thanked me.

"Now why don't you get up and get ready? We have an election to salvage." I smelled the air and gagged a little. "And how about a shower? You're ruining my couch."

He smiled, finished off the chips, and went off to get a shower. I waited in the kitchen, prepping us both something of substance to eat that wasn't deep fried potato slices. After a half-hour or so, Spence emerged in the other outfit we picked up at the store. We ate and set off for school, ready to face the music. I could tell he was antsy the whole car ride. Like just sitting still was too much for him. I got that way sometimes when I'm anxious so I understood.

When we got to the school, he begged me not to leave him. I swore I wouldn't.

"We're in this together," I promised.

He exhaled deeply and exited the car. I followed closely behind him.

The reception we received upon entry into the school was lukewarm, to say the very least. Whenever one of the popular kids does something remotely controversial, word travels fast. Everyone and their mother must have known about what happened in the locker room. There are a total of fifty-three players on the team. Add in the equipment managers, assistants,

and coaches themselves, the number of people in that locker room adds up and gives more opportunities for stories to leak out to the public. And considering we're all in high school, spreading rumors for attention is a part of everyday life. I know because I used to do it for sport.

As we entered the main doors and walked down the hallway, we were confronted by dozens and dozens of people staring us down. They wore expressions of confusion, anger, and excitement to see the story of the week return to public life.

But, most of all, there was laughter.

Stifled laughter, sure, but laughter. We could see them laughing behind their hands or turning to laugh with their friends in small circles or failing miserably to conceal smirks of amusement. But due to Spencer's status, he was all but immune to getting pointed and laughed at like the girl who showed up to Homecoming with a spray tan that made her look like a traffic cone.

That was until Tyler Benjamin, the dweeby little Freshman who won the Senior vs. Freshman dodgeball game a couple weeks ago, walked up to us. We were all alone, surrounded by onlookers, and Tyler approached us with a crowd of friends at his back. He gave Spencer a good, long look. He reached both of his hands up to his own throat, squeezed a little, and made this embellished gurgling noise before gasping for air. A few drops of spit flew out of his mouth and landed on my and Spencer's shirts. He stood there and did this for a solid five seconds for everyone to see.

And everyone laughed.

They couldn't keep it in any longer and seeing Spencer get owned by a no-name Freshman was icing on the cake. We were surrounded by laughter. It bounced off of the halls and echoed deep inside our minds.

Spencer harshly shoved past him and stormed off, almost sending the kid flying onto the ground. I rushed by the cocky little shit. Glancing back after I caught up with Spencer, I saw that the shove didn't phase Tyler at all. If anything, it made him laugh louder. His friends gave him high-fives and praised him as though he were a demigod.

And he was.

He, a Freshman with no claim to fame except whatever popularity he had among his classmates, made the Captain of the Football Team and King of Arlington City High look like an absolute fool.

It was the easiest rise to power in human history.

Tracy

On the day of the election, I couldn't bring myself to enter the school. I sat underneath the tree and watched everyone else file in. Spencer and Ashley got in pretty early. I'd heard about the blowup after the game. I wondered if that would hurt his chances at all. Everyone was calling Brad Kendrick a rapist now. I couldn't blame them. He was a total creep and everybody on Student Council whispered about him and his old girlfriend having... issues. I made sure to be the first person to let anyone remotely interested in him know that he was weird with girls, but I never thought he'd be capable of actually doing it, though.

Seeing Kate exit her mom's car hurt. I wanted to apologize, but I knew she'd never accept it and would *never* forgive me. She was waiting near the front door in a little blouse and sweater. I wondered how she could handle the heat. It was a scorcher that day and it wasn't even noon.

I saw what she was waiting for as soon as they stepped into view. Everyone did.

Lauren and Beth walked side by side toward the school. They were dressed up like it was Prom or something. Everyone was gonna be talking about them. I assume this was a Beth plan. She'd want all the attention on them today. I'd never seen a girl wear a tuxedo in person before. For all her faults, she made it work.

I hadn't been able to sleep much lately. Just thinking about what happened kept me up for hours every night. I couldn't believe I let myself stoop so low. I turned into her. I became a monster. I nearly ruined Lauren's life for petty revenge. I kept trying to justify it in my head, but I never found a scenario where I wasn't the biggest asshole ever. And now I had nothing. Kate hated me, Lauren will never trust me again, and Beth was going to run the school. It was a cruel irony. I tried to do what I thought was best and I lost it all.

I know I deserve it. I'm a terrible person.

Looking back with the flawless power of hindsight, I should have done everything differently. I could have stopped her and kept Kate by my side. I was just so angry... I tried to think of ways to make things right, but nothing would ever work. I can only hope time really does heal all wounds and pray she gives me another chance to be her friend down the road.

The girls met up, complimented each other's outfits, and entered the school in a V-formation with Lauren at the front of the pack. In a few hours, they would be in charge and everything would change.

The first bell rang. I had to get to English class.

Katherine

When Lauren and Beth got out of the car and walked towards me, I swear I thought I was having a dream where I showed up to a dance in nothing but my pajamas or something. Beth shot me a text last night saying to “dress nice.” I didn’t think she meant to dress for a Formal or Prom or something. I thought I was overdoing it when I chose the nice blouse and sweater that I wear to church, but they went all out. I didn’t think Beth was the type to wear a tux. The dress looked amazing on Lauren. If this was what she was wearing to Homecoming, Beth was the luckiest girl in the world.

“You look beautiful,” I exclaimed when they approached me.

Lauren blushed. “Aww! You look great, too, Katie!”

Beth didn’t wait for me to compliment her choice of wardrobe. She simply straightened her tie and said, “We all look amazing, don’t we?”

Lauren led us inside with Beth at her right hand and myself at her left. I couldn’t imagine a scenario where everyone wouldn’t be staring at us as soon as we got into school. Beth really knew how to make an entrance.

As expected, everyone stopped and stared at us. I felt so underdressed compared to them. I forced myself to wear a confident smile despite feeling beads of sweat trickling down my spine. Wearing a sweater in this heat was a mistake and it only made me sweat more. I hated being the center of attention. This was like Hell to me. Again, total irony considering I wanted to try to become the unofficial leader of the entire student body, but what’s done is done. Everyone was watching my every move. I prayed I didn’t do something to ruin Lauren’s chances.

But at the same time... it felt kinda good to be seen.

I convinced myself that I could actually win the election because I had a couple people whispering in my ear, swearing that I had a shot and was valued around here. Those two people were my mother and a total snake that was using me. But for a little while, I would lie awake just fantasizing about this exact scenario. Everyone watching me, everyone staring. People showing me respect and caring about me and wanting me to be at the head of the table. I don’t think that’s selfish or wrong or anything. Everyone deserves to want to feel wanted and accepted and loved. Maybe if I had more confidence, I could be at the head of this procession.

If you’d just kept your mouth shut, their lives would be ruined and you’d be President...

It didn’t matter anymore. I made my choice. The *right* choice. Lauren was going to be the Queen and I would be at her side. She was the only real friend I had. And Beth. I was still unsure about her because of everything that Tracy said she had done, but the more I talked to her, the more I saw that she was a good person. She’s also fiercely protective of Lauren and extremely devoted to her. I respect that. Plus she had accepted me into her inner circle with open arms despite nearly ruining her and Lauren’s lives. That takes serious personal strength.

We walked into English class together and, much like in the hallways, everyone was staring. Even Mr. Hardy was shocked to see us all dressed up.

“Woah, did they schedule a dance without telling me ahead of time?” he asked with a chuckle. Anyone else and it would have sounded really creepy. But Mr. Hardy was a good guy.

I saw Ashley staring at us as we walked to our seats. More specifically, she was staring at Lauren. I knew what was on her mind just by looking at her. I pitied her. Seeing her with Spencer all of those times made me feel extremely jealous, even if I hated myself for feeling that way. I can't imagine how she must feel right now, but at the same time I completely understood.

"Hey Ash," I softly said to her. "I'm glad you're here." It was the first time we'd seen each other since the intervention and the first time we got to speak one-on-one since the party.

"I'm glad to see you, too, Kate," she said with a smile to mask the pain.

We sat down and prepared for class to start. Mr. Hardy passed out papers while we waited for everyone to enter the room. I checked mine over. A+, as usual. As I was burying it in my backpack, the P.A. came to life. We didn't have morning announcements until after the first period was over so this was very odd.

"Spencer Barnett, please report to my office," Mr. O'Reilly said. "Spencer Barnett, report to my office."

"Oh, shit," I heard Ashley mutter under her breath. I didn't turn back to face her.

"Huh," Mr. Hardy said with a furrowed brow. "Wonder what that's about."

He may not have known what was going on, but I knew. Lauren knew. Beth knew. Ashley knew. Everyone in the whole school knew. Now we all waited, holding our breaths, to see what would be done about it.

Spencer

I didn't even have time to get myself settled into my first class before they called me down to the main office. I knew this was coming. After what happened, punishment was unavoidable. But did they really need to do it this way? Make some big spectacle of it and parade me around like a cow in front of the entire school?

When I got to the front office, Rose, the woman in charge up there, gave me a little scowl. Apparently even she had heard. I didn't like her so her opinion didn't matter to me. She pointed me in the direction of O'Reilly's office, as if I didn't know who called me or where his office was, and I braced myself to face the music.

I poked my head inside and saw three people waiting for me: Mr. O'Reilly, Coach Mullens, and Ms. Debbie, the school's guidance counselor.

Here we go...

O'Reilly offered me a seat in the center of the room. They wasted no time with formalities. "Spencer," O'Reilly stoically began. "I was told about an incident that happened on Friday night during the football game. Before we jump to any conclusions, I wanted to hear your side of the story and know what happened from your perspective."

I knew it was a waste of time. If they really cared about what he did, they would have called Brad down here and taken him away in handcuffs. Instead, I was the sacrificial lamb. It's like what Hank said at the end of *Breaking Bad*: he made up his mind ten minutes ago.

"Brad was threatening me and attacked me and I defended myself," I said. It wasn't a lie and there were more than enough witnesses. He did charge me after I told him to fuck off. I still can't believe I actually kicked his ass. He should have mopped the floor with me.

"Why would he do that?" O'Reilly asked, thoroughly unconvinced.

"Because he was mad that I didn't throw him the ball," I responded with a hint of annoyance at the stupidity of the question. It wasn't actually a lie.

"Just be honest with us, son," Coach said, his voice tired and heavy. "Why'd you do it?"

"I already told you. He was pissed that I didn't pass him the ball, got pissed off, and attacked me in the locker room. Ask literally anyone who was actually there and they'll agree with me. Why am I here and he's allowed to be in class, exactly?"

O'Reilly matched my sarcasm with some of his own. "We'll speak to Brad later. But I heard there was something else that may have caused you to fight. Something that you said during the fight. Do you remember what I'm referring to?"

"That he's a rapist?" I asked. "That he attacked me and I had the right to defend myself? That he's angry we lost a football game and tried to kill me?"

"Spencer, come on," Ms. Debbie began. "We can't just throw around that accusation about someone. It could ruin his life and it isn't fair to him."

"*Fair?!?*" I scoffed. "He tried to *rape* someone! Was it *fair* to the girl he tried to hurt?!?"

"Who?" O'Reilly asked.

It's kind of funny in a way. Every single time something like this happens in a TV show, you're supposed to shut up and say you're not saying anything else without a parent or lawyer. I

didn't have either of those. I was on my own. I realized I was backed into a corner. I wasn't going to sell out Ashley to these people without her permission. I already screwed her over by exposing what he did to everyone. Unless she said it was okay, I wasn't saying shit.

"I'm not allowed to say," I quickly responded.

"It was Ashley, wasn't it?" O'Reilly asked, eyes narrowed. He was going for the kill. I made sure to not let my face give away the truth. "It makes sense. She thinks something happened to her, she runs away for a couple of days, and comes back when she knows people are going to hurt the man she believes wanted to hurt her."

I stayed stone-faced. "He's a rapist. He deserved to get the shit kicked out of him."

"Spencer—"

"And he attacked *me*. Ask anyone in that room and they'll agree with me." I turned to Coach Mullens. "You weren't in the room so you didn't see him rush me. But he did and he tried to break my back. He deserved it—"

"Spencer, that's enough," O'Reilly said, raising his voice. "Whether or not that is true is irrelevant. You can't just attack a student because you heard a dirty rumor about them."

"He attacked me!"

"I'll be sure to talk to people who were in the room to get the truth of the situation," O'Reilly oh-so-nobly vowed. "But in the meantime, we need to discuss you and your role in this. Especially with these accusations you're throwing around about another student."

I tried to say that he was guilty, but O'Reilly raised his hand to silence me.

"Spencer, you're off the team," Coach Mullens said. I couldn't tell if there was a hint of regret and relief in his tone. "I can't let you back on after what you did to Brad. It wouldn't be right. There's a difference between brothers fighting and what you did. It would set a bad example for the others if you were allowed back."

I was stunned. Football was my life. It was my future. It was the only way I was getting into college. I'm nothing without it. A nobody. I don't have a career, I don't have college...

"No..."

"In the meantime," Ms. Debbie cut in with her sweet little voice, "we're going to talk about your anger issues and try to work through them together over the next few weeks."

"But I won't be taking disciplinary action against you," O'Reilly promised. "You're a good kid going through some tough times. But if anything like this happens again, though, you will be expelled. Anyone else and they'd be gone already, but you've been a model student up until now and that means something to us. Just know that if we hear you spreading these rumors about Brad again, we will be forced to take measures against you."

"We can't say whether Mr. Kendrick will press charges against you for the assault, however, and there's nothing we can do in that case," Ms. Debbie said with the fakest sorrow.

Coach Mullens shook his head. "Why would you do that, Spencer? Why would you throw your life away? You had such a bright future."

Out of everything that was just said, everything they said to me since I walked in this room, that was the thing that hurt the most. Hearing the man I looked up to—the man who gave

me a shot as the leader of the team and was more of a father to me than my own dad ever was—actually say that I threw my life away? I felt something physically snap inside my head. Like a dam had burst and all the anger and contempt came flowing out. I would have accepted losing the team and a suspension after a little while, but he went and made it personal by saying I threw my own life away? For defending my ex from the guy who tried to rape her?

He made the biggest mistake of his life by just opening his fucking mouth.

“Because I’m sick of it.”

“Of what?” Coach asked.

“Of my life. Of school. Of my *friends*. Of you and your bullshit football team.”

“Spencer, please,” O’Reilly interjected.

I cut him off fast. I wasn’t done. Not by a long shot. If I was allowed back in school after this, it showed just how spineless these people really were. I was going to get my money’s worth. I had nothing left to lose.

“And I’m glad you’re kicking me off your worthless team. It’s meaningless. It’s pathetic. You’re pathetic. And I don’t need you, you need me. You old, pathetic scumbag. If you’re going to keep a rapist on your team and kick *me* off, fine. I don’t want to play for you—”

“Spencer, that’s enough,” Ms. Debbie warned.

“So take your football team and go fuck yourself with it.”

“SPENCER!” O’Reilly’s was *pissed*. I almost laughed in his stupid face.

To his credit, Coach Mullens took it like a man and stayed silent the whole time. I expected him to stand up and break my jaw. I expected him to call me a son of a bitch and say I was a pathetic crybaby loser. I would if I were him. Instead, he just stared me down. His eyes were tired. He looked world-weary. I don’t know if what I said hurt him, but he seemed disappointed to hear me say what I did. I don’t regret saying it. He needed to hear it. If I was going to be punished and Brad could stay on the team, he was guilty for enabling the shit he almost did by letting him stay in the limelight.

I couldn’t stay there any longer. I rose to my feet and stormed out. I heard O’Reilly and Ms. Debbie call after me. I didn’t care. I was out of the office in seconds. I made for the front door. Thankfully, the janitor was replacing the hinges so it was wide open. I don’t know where he was, though. It didn’t matter.

“Spencer!”

If I were anyone else, I would have ignored them. But I knew Ashley’s voice and slowly turned around, being sure to not lose my temper with her. She didn’t deserve it.

“What happened in there?” she asked.

“I’m not expelled, but I’m sure as shit never coming back here,” I said with a cruel laugh. I was more angry now than I had ever been in my entire life. “I’m off the team now. All because I tried to stick up for you.”

“Wait, no, but... did you tell them about—”

“Ash, they *know*. About him. But they aren’t doing anything about it.” I said, bitterly. “They know it was you that he tried to hurt, but I didn’t say anything.” I calmed down a little,

letting some pain escape the suffocating anger I was holding in. “Ash, they don’t care about any of us. They don’t care. Why should I stay here when nobody cares? It’s not worth it.”

“You know that’s not true.” She took a step towards me. I felt like I was about to jump off the building and she was the one thing trying to stop me. “I care. Lauren and Kate care. Frank would if you talked to him. And what about Megan? You said Friday night you wouldn’t just leave her alone. Don’t leave. Please.”

“I’ll check up on her soon. But I need to get out of here for a while.”

“Let me come with you.”

I blinked.

“You don’t wanna go where I’m going.”

I turned and walked away. I heard her following after me. She tried to get my attention, but I wasn’t stopping for anyone. I unlocked my truck from across the lot. Ash was still following me, pleading for me to stop and talk things through. I was done talking. I was done with everything. I had to go.

I rolled down the window before driving away. I looked Ashley in the eyes. I was trying not to cry.

“I’m sorry.”

I revved the engine and sped out of the lot and into the street. I was never coming back here. I swore it right there. I had no future, after all. I threw it away. My life was over, apparently. All because I did the right thing and outed a rapist to the entire school. That was the last time I would ever try to do anything for these people. I sacrificed so much for them and this is how they repaid me. Never again.

My life is over.

Katherine

Ashley came to find me during second period. We had a study hall together so I wasn't very hard to find. She took me to an empty classroom and told me everything. She said she was so worried about Spencer and there was nothing she could do for her.

"We should find Lauren and Beth," I advised. "See what they have to say."

"I'm just so worried about him..." She started to cry. "I think he's..."

I reached out to hug her. She began to cry into my shoulder, her mascara staining my blouse. I didn't mind. "He's gonna be alright," I promised. "We're gonna be okay, too."

She continued to cry. I didn't know what to do. I figured he was in trouble when I heard the call from O'Reilly's office, but I never thought he would get kicked off the team or anything. Don't boys fight all the time in football?

That was when I remembered that Brad's mom worked for the Mayor. Beth warned us about that when the issue of taking him down was brought up. All it took was one phone call from his office and Spencer was finished. Spencer's life was ruined and Brad was allowed to stay on the team and sit in Calculus a few rooms down.

They were all such hypocrites. It wasn't fair.

"Look at me."

Ashley slowly raised her head. Her eyes were bright red and tears streamed down her face. She tried to stop crying, but couldn't.

"Spencer is going to be fine. I promise. And you and I are going to make sure Brad never gets the chance to hurt someone ever again. Do you hear me? We're going to take that motherfucker down."

Beth

I did not hear about Spencer's walkout until around third period. A few people were wandering the halls and saw him storm out. Ashley apparently tried to stop him, but failed. No one was sure where he went or what exactly went down in the office after O'Reilly called for him. Now he was possibly expelled, off the football team, facing criminal charges, preparing to shoot the school up for revenge, the rumor mill was running wild.

At the start of fourth period, we wondered about the status of the debate. Without Spencer there to defend himself, who else would step up for him? He was the pariah of the school right now. This was quite amusing to me because you would think the boy accused of rape would be the bigger outcast. Nobody had anything good to say about Spencer. I missed seeing that Tyler kid from the dodgeball game making a fool of Spencer in front of all of his classmates. It was apparently quite funny. I am quite certain I would have laughed at his misfortune under my breath along with everyone else.

From what I gathered, Frank was not going up to bat for his old friend either. Without his support, no one else would support Spencer at the debate except maybe Ashley. But given the negative press surrounding the situation, I expect she will want to stay as far away from it as possible.

My questions about the debate were answered when the P.A. static filled the room and our noble principal, Mr. O'Reilly, addressed the school.

"Attention, teachers and students, please stop what you're doing and listen to the following announcement. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the debate for the position of Student Council President has been canceled. I repeat, the debate has been canceled. Because of this development, the elections will now begin immediately. Teachers, please hand out the ballots to your classes. Students, fill out your choice and submit your ballot into the voting box located on your teacher's desk. Fourth period will continue uninterrupted. Thank you."

Everyone groaned. Not because they finally got to engage in the *dem-o-cratic process*, but because they were being forced to endure a full fourth period and did not get an excuse to skip it. The debate was meant to serve as an early end to the day, where everyone could shut their brains off and heckle the candidates trying to win their future.

Now we got to have a full class and wait another two hours before we could leave.

Ms. Kendall rose from her desk with the ballots in hand. "Well, Lauren, best of luck! Same to Spencer, who isn't here, unfortunately. Wherever he is, best of luck to him as well. And by the way, Lauren, I *love* your dress! I'm so sorry you got all dressed up for nothing now."

Lauren smiled happily at her. "Thank you so much, Ms. Kendall! But it's okay, things happen, I guess"

She had yet to compliment me on my tux. My opinion on Ms. Kendall dropped like a stone down a well in the span of a single day.

As she did before with the quizzes from what seems like so long ago, she handed stacks of ballots to the first person in every row to take one and pass the rest back. When I got mine, I turned and handed the rest to Lauren with a smile and wink.

The ballots were just pieces of printer paper cut split into two sections.

On the bottom half were the positions of Junior Class Representative. I voted for Victoria and Jasmine. They were always nice to me and Victoria deserved a win after everything that went down during Junior year. I barely knew any of the other competitors so it was an easy choice.

On the top was where the real magic happens. Four boxes and names transcribed on them: Lauren, Spencer, Katherine whose name and box was crossed out with a black marker, and Write-In. I can only imagine the administration was thrilled to learn of Katherine's late departure from the race, forcing them to either leave the option open and let people vote for her or make them need to cross the names out individually. This is why waiting for things to develop before making a move is the best option, in my humble opinion.

I scanned the paper over with my red pen in hand. God forbid I make the wrong choice.

Hmm... which one, which one...

Putting a little check mark beside Lauren's name was the easiest decision of my life. Putting the heart beside her name was even easier. It never should have happened like this.

Katherine

I looked over my ballot when I finally received it. I'm not going to lie, it really hurt seeing my name with a streak of black ink cutting straight through it. I thought I really had a shot. Maybe I still did if I had stayed in it. With everything going on with Spencer, I could possibly have politicked my way into second place. Maybe even first if I really, *really* tried.

But I'm not like that. I'm not a monster. I'm not going to stoop to lies and manipulation to get what I want. This is high school, not Washington. I still couldn't believe Tracy betrayed me the way she did. I saw her watching us enter the school, just for a moment. She could have been beside me if she hadn't been so vile.

And now Spencer's reputation was ruined and Lauren was receiving my vote.

Life is weird like that.

Ashley

I wanted to vote for Lauren so badly. And I wanted to vote for Spencer. I just wanted to make both of them happy. They have done so much for me recently even though I've been awful to them.

Now Spencer is gone and Lauren has Beth and I'm all alone.

Out of all the mistakes I've made recently, hurting him was the worst. My brain had been so fucked up and I kept making dumb mistakes. I was so focused on myself that I didn't realize how much he had been hurting. How angry he was. I tried to text Megan and ask her to call Spencer and check on him, but she was in school and wasn't able to respond. I just hoped she wouldn't get worried by my texts and calls.

I eventually willed myself to vote for Spencer. As much as I loved Lauren, I needed to support him right now, however I could. Even if it was something as simple as a vote for a student council job, I'd do it.

I just hoped he was okay.

Spencer

I pulled into my driveway, thinking home was the only place I could go. It was the only place I felt safe, which was incredibly ironic considering the circumstances. I just wanted to go to my room and bury myself in the blankets and never wake up. When I approached the front door, I saw a piece of paper taped to the front door, behind the screen door. I ripped it off like a bandage and read it, knowing exactly what it was from the signature at the bottom of the note.

SPENCER.

I GOT A CALL FROM YOUR PRINCIPAL AND COACH. DON'T BOTHER COMING BACK. YOU'RE NOT WANTED HERE. YOU ARE AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THIS FAMILY. YOUR MOTHER WOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOU. I'M GLAD SHE'S GONE SO SHE CAN'T SEE YOUR FAILURE. NEVER COME BACK.

I crumpled up the note and tossed it on the ground.

After I left home, I drove for a long time. I had no destination, I just drove. I wanted to get as far away from this city as possible. There was nothing left for me here. I wondered if this was how Ashley felt. I really did consider taking her with me, but I knew it wasn't best for her. I needed her out of my life. I needed all of them out of my life. Wherever I end up, they can't be there. I needed to escape this nightmare.

Hours passed and I was halfway to Austin by the time I realized where I was going. I pulled off of the highway and took the side roads. I didn't want to end up anywhere in particular. I was cruising down Route 75. The radio was off. I only cared about what was in front of me.

It was well past noon when I got a call from Megan. I couldn't bring myself to answer it. I couldn't let her hear me like this. She was the only person I wanted to protect in life and I failed her. I ruined my life trying to do the right thing. How could she understand? How could anyone ever give a shit about me again.

The road stretched on for miles of straight, uninterrupted road. Trees on either side of the street and few houses. I felt so isolated, even if the nearest city was only a couple of turns away. It felt peaceful to be alone. It made me feel like the world was small. Nothing but me and the open road.

I pressed my foot against the pedal, increasing the speed. I felt like I was gliding across the concrete. That truck was amazing. It's the best gift anyone has ever gotten me. It's a shame that it came from that scumbag I was forced to call my father. I wondered if he would lay off Megan after it was done. It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing did.

The truck sped up even more, crossing the hundred mile per hour marker and rising fast. I was flying. I was soaring. I felt invincible. I didn't even think twice about the tree that was coming up ahead. It looked sturdy enough. Strong. I felt my hands begin to turn the wheel before my brain could register what I'd just done.

I don't even remember the truck slamming into the tree. Everything just went to black.

Beth

About twenty minutes after voting was done, the P.A. came to life. We were in the middle of a fascinating discussion on bacteria. I almost felt sad knowing it over. Almost.

“Attention, everyone,” O’Reilly spoke monotonously into the microphone. It was clear that decades in the education system had broken him, both mentally and emotionally. “The voting period has concluded and we will now tally the results. Would the teachers please bring the ballot boxes to the front office to be tallied? And anyone who acts out during this time will be sent to my office so no horseplay.”

Ms. Kendall took the little handmade bird box she used as our ballot box and started toward the door. “Alright, reread some of Chapter Four so we can discuss it when I get back. And you heard him, no horseplay. Especially you, Newman.”

Frank fluttered his eyelashes and put on his most innocent tone that was never going to fool anyone. “But, ma’am, I don’t own a horse.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes, the ballot bird box tucked under her fleshy arm as she left the room.

On cue, everyone began talking. Do teachers really believe we will work in silence when they leave the room and tell us not to talk? How naive are they? Unless everyone is too tired to open their mouths, we are going to speak to our friends. How can they possibly stop us?

I turned back and beamed at Lauren. “Can you believe that in exactly a half hour, we’ll be running this place?”

“Hey, don’t get too cocky,” she warned, though the prospect was growing on her. “We still have to actually *win*.”

“Trust me,” I assured her. “We did.”

I can tell she wanted to hold my hands. “Thank you. For everything.”

I lowered my voice. Everyone else nearly drowned my own voice out. “I’d do anything for you. You know that, right?”

Lauren blushed a little and nodded her head. “You better wear that more often when we go out,” she whispered, nodding at my tux.

I looked over at Ashley, who was looking at us. I gave her a friendly nod before turning to Katherine to give her my pre-celebratory thanks and support.

“We couldn’t have done this without you,” I said. “You understand that, right?”

“I feel like you were gonna win regardless of if I helped you or not,” she admitted.

“Nevertheless, I am very grateful. As is Lauren.”

Lauren looked at her and happily nodded at her new friend. We all laughed. It was cute. Very Degrassi.

My estimate of how long it took for the vote tallying to be done was off by about seven minutes. I was surprised they only needed twenty-three minutes to count and recount over two thousand individual votes for President alongside all the votes for Class Representatives. Once

again, I was left on the edge of my seat. In the meantime, I got to discover the fascinating fate of evolving bacteria.

When the P.A. turned on for the final time that day to discuss the election, I felt my breath quicken. Despite my all but certainty that we were going to win this thing, the possibility of defeat was ever-present. Spencer, despite his faults and errors over the past few days, was a viable threat to anyone around here and though he had lost much open support from his friends, people still cared about him.

If only he had kept his mouth shut.

“Students, may I have your attention,” O’Reilly said into the microphone. “We have tallied the votes for the Student Council Election and have the results. We would like to thank everyone for this patience and the candidates for participating in the democratic process.”

I rolled my eyes. If there was ever someone who liked to hear himself talk, it was him. It was nice to see he was keeping Principal Patrick’s memory alive and well with his bullshit hyping up an extremely corrupt political system. I hoped Patty was barking in Hell for all the things he didn’t do.

I made a note of memorizing the upcoming names so I knew who to quickly rally to Lauren’s side when she took her rightful place in the spotlight. Speed was critical to prevent the rise of opposing factions that could throw a wrench in my grand plans.

“Here are the results,” O’Reilly continued. “For the positions of Freshman Class Representatives... Tyler Benjamin and Natasha Lopez!”

I recognized Tyler’s name immediately, though I did not know that was actually his last name. Apparently winning the dodgeball game and embarrassing Spencer on the day of the election was more than enough to get him a win. Not following the political situation in the Freshman class may hurt us in the long run. I made a note of following those little bastards more closely going forward.

Regarding Natasha, she was a total nobody to me. I figured she must either be attractive or disabled if she won this so easily. Either one would work to our advantage.

“For the positions of Sophomore Class Representatives... Alex Weatherspoon and Raymond Levitsky!”

I vaguely remember Raymond from his failed attempt at asking Heather Sinclair to Homecoming the year prior. He was laughed out of the building. This must either be a prank by his peers or his genuine rise up the ranks of the Sophomore class hierarchy. If it really is the former, it’s disgusting and I will do everything I can to support him going forward. No one should endure this kind of humiliation.

You’d think these people would’ve learned from last time...

Regarding Alex, I have nothing to say of him. He was a member of the varsity basketball team and a close confidant of Vinny’s. In regards to his character and ambition, he was nothing but a little worm that I otherwise would never spend time thinking of. Having him informing on our movements to his buddies was extremely detrimental and that put him directly in my crosshairs. I knew I would need to tread lightly with him around.

“For the positions of Junior Class Representatives... Victoria Falco and Jasmine Jackson!”

Even after everything that happened, I was genuinely shocked Victoria did not make a push for the Presidency. She was very popular, drop dead gorgeous, and extremely intelligent. Had her nudes not been leaked, she would have been the toughest competition Lauren and I would have faced. There is no doubt in my mind that she was the only person who could have bested Lauren in this election, Spencer included. Of course that was also because I promised myself many months ago that I would never try to hurt her after all she went through so she had the advantage over Spencer.

As for Jasmine, she was the brains behind Victoria’s power. She was also extremely attractive and intelligent, but she knew how to sell herself and Victoria to people. They had been inseparable since they were little and she knew exactly how to get people’s support. I had seen her campaigning for the both of them during the previous weeks out of the corner of my eye.

Having their support was vital, especially since they were in our class. I intended to become *very* close to her in the coming weeks.

“For the positions of Senior Class Representatives... Tomás Jimenez and Michelle Wilson!”

Having a member of the football team on the student council alongside a member of the basketball team was going to be interesting. They *hated* each other. I would have to deal with the potential fracture in our united front sooner rather than later, especially with the Anniversary coming up. God knows I was dreading that.

Out of all of the football players we could be stuck with, Tom was the best. He was screwing either Casey or Heather (I can never tell them apart anymore) and he was pretty laid back for a football player. If we were stuck with Frank or Brad, we’d be absolutely fucked. In more ways than one.

Michelle was a good choice for Class Rep. She was one of the few people I felt I could trust around campus, even if we never became *close* close with each other despite our mutual friendship with Lauren. I was the new girl. She was a good person and her friendship with Lauren was important to our goals. She would be easy to get support from if the need ever arose.

“And finally, for the position of Student Council President...”

I held my breath. I hated this man more than words could ever explain and his desire to add suspense by keeping the result hidden only added fuel to the fire. I was tapping the top of the desk aggressively, trying to distract myself with my hands. My lungs were aching from holding my breath. If he waited a second more, I might scream.

“Lauren Bradshaw!”

I turned back to see how Lauren was taking it. All of our hard work had finally paid off. She was sitting back in her seat, a wide smile spread across her face. She looked happier than I had ever seen her before in my life. I was so proud of her. She deserved this. She earned it.

Katherine leaned over the aisle to congratulate her. A few other people clapped and wished her well. Even Ms. Kendall jumped in on the well wishing train, telling Lauren she knew she would do great and looked forward to what she would do.

Lauren thanked everyone individually before looking at me. I could see the elation in her eyes. We shared this moment together. No one else mattered. This was the culmination of so much work and I could not imagine sharing this victory with anyone else. Despite ourselves, we stood and hugged each other. I gave her a couple Tony Soprano pats on the back to make it seem like I wasn't savoring the feeling of hugging my girlfriend in public, but who were we kidding? We should have been able to celebrate together the way Spencer and Ashley would have done had he been the winner.

For one brief moment, there was only her and I. The real Queens of the school. A spotlight shone down upon us as we held each other in front of an entire classroom of people. My heart stood still. Our collective energy was brighter than any star. Nothing could ruin this moment for us. Everything was so right. Everyone would be bowing to us sooner than they realized.

We weren't slated to have our first student council meeting until the next day. For now, we could enjoy the victory and worry about the real work that was to come later. We could never show up to a meeting and do nothing for these people if we so choose. We were in charge now. Who would dare stand in our way?

All that mattered was the two of us.

I felt her begin to pull away and I had to force myself to let her go. My smile was still frozen on my face. She smiled at me one last time before going to shake hands with the people who helped her get to this place.

I finally exhaled. This was it. It was over.

We won.

About the Author

Nicholas Grubbs was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Point Park University in 2019 with a Bachelor's in Screenwriting. It was during this time in college that the basis for the **MACBETHANY** was born from a number of scripts that would be the basis for the series as we know it today.

For interview requests, meetups, or to say hello, write to me!

Personal Email: nwgrubbsofficial@gmail.com

Personal Twitter: @NGrubbsOfficial

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Thank you for reading.

Exclusive Sneak Preview

MacBethany

Homecoming Court

Book Two

Coming soon!

ABSOLUTE POWER

Beth

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

This snippet of a much larger quote, which has been paraphrased by wannabe scholars and intellectuals for nearly two centuries, originated from Lord John Dalberg-Acton, a long-dead British writer and Member of Parliament. The meaning itself, in my humble opinion, is pretty self-explanatory. Anyone who has ever written an essay on a historical leader of men like Joseph Stalin or Winston Churchill or FDR or basically any monarch that has ever lived has probably said some paraphrased version of this quote when explaining their heinous actions and how the leader became the person they would become.

As someone with a great interest in history, I did a little light reading on the background of this quote in the lead-up to the election. I swear by the view that context and background is vital to everything. In this case, Lord Acton was a rather prominent politician in the mid-late 19th century. He was a leader of the Catholic faction in the predominantly Protestant British government and had very strong views on the state of the Church at the time as they struggled to maintain their grip on Europe in the wake of liberalism.

Acton was also a strong supporter and lobbyist for the American Confederacy during the course of our Civil War.

Lord Acton believed that they were the morally superior cause and believed their defense of states' rights was just. If he had his way, the British would have intervened in the Civil War to help topple the corrupt, radical, and tyrannical Abraham Lincoln and protect the rights of the (white) people of the American South.

Where the fuck do I even begin with this one?

First, let us discuss the pure hypocrisy of the idea of a Catholic, who believes all life is precious and should be protected, supporting a slave state and their endeavor to keep their slaves. Every day, the Twitter feeds of millions of users are flooded with the latest incident in the debate over abortion or contraception or school shootings or whatever else is the hot topic of the week that is used as an excuse to call for donations to a political campaign of your choosing that ultimately end up doing nothing because the politicians want to ensure the issue so it never goes away and more money keeps flowing in as people get more and more afraid. A truly vicious cycle.

It was no different back then with Lord Acton either. Humanity is so easily corruptible and will follow the strongest figure in the room with little resistance. They would allow and enable an institution as purely evil as slavery to exist because they believe their leader is justified in supporting it because... reasons. Or because they were raised to think one race inferior to theirs. Or because a religious text first written thousands of years ago said slavery is cool.

If life is so precious, why should entire races of people be treated like shit while you tell yourself you will get into Heaven? Why can you say you are in the right by supporting the people that own slaves?

Second, it is very ironic that the man who believes that power corrupts wants a rebellious government to break away from their original country and allow their own brand of corruption to spread, specifically in the form of an invasion of the Caribbean to gain more slave states.

Using the explanation of “states’ rights” to justify a rebellion that forms another government that ultimately will cause more pain and suffering in the world does not sit well with me and I question how it sat well with Lord Acton. Even worse, and even more ironically, he was an *open critic* of slavery and spoke against it while in office. The catch? He believed that it was equally immoral to take the slaves from their masters and free them, feeling it was theft of property. Freeing people from bondage is as bad as chaining them to the pole and whipping them until their backs look like checkerboards, at least according to Lord Acton.

Third, and this is a big one, the idea of “The Lost Cause Myth” is the most hilarious thing ever to me. The ultimate counter to the “states’ rights” argument is the following question: the states’ rights to what? Anyone who tries to keep arguing needs only be shown a PDF copy of the Confederate Constitution and type in the words “slave” and “negro” in the search bar to see just what that little group of wannabe revolutionaries was all about. The Federal government may have butchered Reconstruction because Andrew Johnson was a corrupt racist and the Northerners may have become filthy little carpetbaggers who exploited a war-torn South for their own personal gain, but it all could have been avoided.

Any man who believes that the South had a right to rebel and that it was immoral to take their slaves away should not be giving lectures on the issue of absolute power corrupting absolutely. It is so laughably backwards that I almost choked on the water I was drinking when I was researching this topic.

So why do I bring this up?

The context of the statement is vital to understanding why he said it in the first place. Context is the most key thing to look for in history. You cannot claim to be doing history justice if you just see a quote you like and throw it on a paper for American History class. Anyone can throw down a quote about preserving nature in their Biology paper without realizing the speaker was noted conservationist and animal lover Adolf Hitler commenting on the need for *lebensraum* for the German people while simultaneously advocating for protecting the animals that live inside said *lebensraum* because he likes feeding baby deer and petting his dog who he had killed with a crushed up cyanide capsule to ensure his own capsule would work.

The context of the “absolute power” quote is rather funny with its real origins as well. Acton, also a noted Catholic writer, was commenting on the then-recent shift towards the concept of *papal infallibility* that was being pitched around the Vatican at the time of the First Vatican Council. What now serves as the basic concept that a Pope can never be wrong when preaching was a hotly contested issue back then. Acton opposed it vehemently and thought the idea of papal infallibility was insane. He even traveled to Rome to lobby against it on behalf of British Catholics. His efforts were in vain, however, and papal infallibility is now considered the law of the Catholic Church.

Anyone who looks past the zealous nature of the decree sees it for what it really is: a desperate last grasp at influencing the secular world while the blatant overreaching by the church was being lessened every year since the destruction of the Holy Roman Empire in the wake of the rise of liberalism and secularism in *dem-o-cratically* elected governments around the world. Bismarck, a man I am a personal fan of, was particularly against papal infallibility because he knew it was very clearly the Pope trying to regain lost influence over the German Empire after years of being a bitter ex.

Subsequent Popes would deny this and supporters of the Church will say it was “God’s Will” that that specific man be elected the leader of the Church and that his word goes while the rest of the Vatican would do things like criticizing Pope Francis for saying that being nice to gay people is actually an okay thing. Some people go so far as to say he is the anti-Christ for even considering such a thing. American Catholics can be some of the biggest hypocrites ever. They think having an ocean between them and Rome gives them a free pass to bash the Pope. A couple hundred years ago, that kind of thing would get you burned at the stake.

How does one pick and choose what is considered “infallible” while also actively following a religion that preaches infallibility?

Having been through private Catholic school in the past, it was easily one of the first things that really drove me from the faith I was born into at an early age. How can a human being, imperfect creatures allegedly born of sin and can never understand God on a personal level, never say anything that is against God’s will while preaching their own interpretation of the word of God every time the guy who came before them died? It’s a terrible contradiction that borders on Catch-22 territory. It was all just a big political circus.

Acton was right to fight against it. Shame he lost.

This is the context that people miss when discussing the issue or when they copy and paste the quote on their paper and call it a day. Acton was worried about a man using the literal *Voice of God* to run a religion with billions of followers completely unchecked because, in his own words, he cannot be wrong. It was not about Kings having too much power or a President being allowed to bomb foreign nations without Congressional approval. It was a matter of religion he personally disagreed with.

And therein lies the hypocrisy of his views.

Believing that no one man can rule with unchecked power is, in his own words, wrong. He thought Lincoln was evil because of how much he abused the Constitution and Executive Branch to defeat the rebellion. I have my personal issues with this as well, but I would argue defeating a treasonous slave state warrants some extreme measures. Action believed that in the case of the southern rebellion, taking measures to stop this evil Northern dictator were considered morally just. So much so that Acton wanted the government to support them in their war, going so far and calling for troops to be sent in from Canada to invade the North.

He may have hated slavery, but he also believed that forcibly emancipating the slaves was evil. British lives would have been lost to defend an institution he argued against if he got his way.

Now I have to ask: what if Jefferson Davis created a forcibly-conscripted slave army and had them fight the North in place of the white Southerners that made up the Confederate Army? Or what if he began abusing his own executive powers to win the war? Or what if Robert E. Lee, the personal hero of Lord Acton in the conflict, had waged brutal total war on the North, burning and raping and pillaging in such a way that even General Sherman would have found disturbing? Would the South still be the morally superior force if they did whatever it took to continue to be the plucky underdog fighting the big bad dictator that could easily sweep the floor with them? Would the pro-life Catholic Church look upon them as the good guys for supporting a country that did a reversal of Sherman's March to the Sea.

At what point does having near-absolute power end and complete and utter absolute power begin? Who does Lord Acton lobby for in Parliament when both sides are equally horrible?

How does a man who is morally opposed to slavery willingly support a pro-slavery nation while also saying it would be wrong to forcibly take their slaves away while also saying that same government should get rid of the slaves peacefully? And what would have happened if the South was on the verge of making a comeback or had outright won the war and Jefferson Davis had stepped in and said that they need to end slavery to keep up good relations with Europe and the slave owners told him to fuck off? Would Robert E. Lee being sent in by a Confederate President to subdue the slave owners and free the slaves be as bad as Lincoln wanting to emancipate the slaves? By Acton's own logic, yes. And *then* I have to ask who would Acton support when the slave owners rebel against a slave owning President?

Jesus Christ, I hate this guy so much. How can you have such conflicting opinions and still believe you are in the right?

Imagine it a bit like this...

Say you are a good old American politician lobbying for a tax on junk food to support healthy eating among poorer people. You also vote to decrease subsidies on farms to curb government spending, raising the prices of healthy foods. You *also* think Michelle Obama's endeavor to remove unhealthy foods from public schools as horrendous government overreach and fight for junk food to be put back in schools. You *also* believe that a free school lunch policy is textbook communism and kids should not be able to eat if they do not have lunch money and do not or cannot bring a lunch from home.

Congratulations!

You have managed to make it impossible for poor people to eat because you raised the prices on both healthy *and* junk food, and you also are forcing financially unstable parents to buy this overpriced food or risk their children starving to death or being taken away by Child Services. I suppose you got your wish of kids eating less because now they are unable to eat anything at all. But spending government money on financial aid programs for these peasants is *communism* and is therefore un-American and you would never support it. Kindly take your place on the tour bus heading down the Hypocrite Highway because you are a morally corrupt

douchebag. You can expect Lord Acton to be the stinking gorilla sitting beside you on your road trip.

The whole thing reminds me of the Jaime Lannister quote from George R.R. Martin's book, *A Clash of Kings*. Though not particularly a fan of the books nor the show, I like to reference a specific quote whenever discussing the hypocrisy of man with people online. It is probably the most damning statement on blind loyalty, religion, and unchecked allegiances I have ever read in my entire life and made me give the whole series a read.

"So many vows... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It's too much. No matter what you do, you're forsaking one vow or the other."

There are always a thousand thousand variables to every situation. Even on the issue of preserving the Union, in Lincoln's case, there is a difference between implementing a draft that forces people to fight and die for their country and suspending *habeas corpus* to imprison political prisoners without a jury trial, something guaranteed to us by the United States Constitution.

Again, I have very mixed feelings on the issue of Lincoln's overreach while serving as President but, unlike Acton, I believe the right side of the war won for the right reasons. The execution of Reconstruction was horrible, not trying and executing the leaders of the Confederacy for treason was a mistake, and I would not hesitate to piss on Andrew Johnson's grave if given the chance, but I could rant on that matter for hours on end.

Do I believe that the American government, especially the Presidency, has too much power? Yes, absolutely. There needs to be more involvement by the people to keep politicians in line and not run the government like a boys' club that serves to enrich them at our expense. But do I believe that *everyone* involved in the boys' club known as American politics end up becoming corrupted by power? No, I do not.

At the same time, the government is so spineless and doesn't do anywhere near enough to protect its people. We live in a world where Twitter Activism takes the place of actual mobilizing and both ends of the political spectrum are reduced to shouting matches instead of actually doing anything. The rich want us fat and lazy so then nothing ever happens to check their power. The only thing preventing 80 year old men from making decisions for my body are a bunch of crying babies on a website with a blue checkmark beside their account name that claim they are socialists but probably haven't read a word of Marx in their lives. We live in a world where people debate whether it's ethical to bully billionaires who want to send gay and trans kids to camps to either cure 'em or kill 'em.

Lord Acton might have an issue with it, but he's dead. Fuck Lord Acton.

Some people have the strength to stand up to those that would oppress them. They would fight for a better way. A just way. Even if they find themselves in a position of having unchecked, absolute power and everyone around them serves at their command, there is no rule saying they must forget themselves and become the villains. Not everyone becomes a

mustache-twirling super villain because they get little influence over other people. There are good people in the world and they would do amazing things in government if given the chance. Ones who do not have morally conflicting views on the world and support the bad guys. Ones who do not line their own pockets with “donations” and let children starve.

There just needs to be more oversight into who we elect, how they behave, and what they do while in office. It’s up to us to make sure absolute power doesn't corrupt absolutely.

I finally exhaled when it was over. I hate public speaking.

Lauren

When Beth asked me to come over to her place and listen to the rough draft of the speech she had to give for History class, I wasn't expecting her to go on such a massive tangent about power and the ethics of the church and British politics. It was about the Civil War or something. Beth said she'd help me write the stupid thing. I was too busy texting everyone to get updates on Spencer to worry about practicing the stupid thing. I figured I'd just wing it. It's not like we haven't been learning about the Civil War since the third grade or anything.

Besides, who can do homework after all the shit we've had to go through?

"Hello?" She waved her hand in my face, waking me from my trance. "You listening?"

"Sorry. Yeah, sorry, go ahead."

I sat there for almost ten minutes while she read off of her paper with perfect poise and stature with a voice as smooth as melted butter. I hadn't even written my paper yet, something I was regretting a lot but recent events made it so hard to sit down and focus on a dumb history essay. And here was Beth with some of the best public speaking I'd ever seen in my life. She says she hates public speaking, but she is amazing at it. I could tell she really cared about this topic and the history behind it.

She should have been the one who was elected President. Not me.

There were two things I wasn't super sure about: her going into such a tangent about the Church and her tangent going after the South.

The Southern part is pretty self-explanatory. She was raised in Pennsylvania. It's different for people up there. I'm not going to disagree with her on this issue, though, slavery was fucked. But there are a lot of old racist assholes around here who would be really pissed to know she was calling out their forefathers and saying that they were the bad guys for getting rich off the backs of enslaved people of color for hundreds of years.

After a little discussion over how much criticism of the South was "too much," she agreed to cut back on the criticism somewhat. But she was adamant that she mention the Confederate Constitution because it was, in her own words, "Readily available for anyone that wants to argue it was over anything else but slavery."

I was also kinda worried that she might get in trouble for going after papal infallibility and all that. I didn't know a lot of the stuff about it that she talked about, and I'm guessing most of the people in class don't care either. My argument was that talking about it wasn't the issue, but making it out like the Pope was the bad guy would make her look bad.

"Why?" she asked. "It's not like it isn't wrong or anything."

"I'm just saying," I said. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

"If they try to get me in trouble for *that*, I'll just talk to Ashley's mom. I'm sure she'd love to have something to go after them for after everything that's happened."

That was when I remembered one line she said towards the end that made me uncomfortable. Out of everything she was talking about saying in her presentation, this was the only thing I actually had a personal stake in.

“Yeah, speaking of her and... you know, everything...” I began, dreading how she’d respond. “I just think that *maybe* you should cut back on the discussion of um... gay people being... you know... sent to death camps?”

“Am I wrong, though?”

“Well, no—”

“Laur, there’s people out there that would *kill us* if they knew who we really were. There’s sixty year old psychopaths who would take us out into the woods, put guns to our heads, rape us, and shoot us for the crime of *existing*. They’re trying to bring back Jim Crow laws and keep lynchings from being federal offenses. Why can’t I say something? If I don’t, who will?”

It made me sick to admit she was right. The world is so fucked.

“It’s not about that, it’s...” I sighed. “Look, I’m really worried about people getting the wrong idea about us if you say something like that and—”

She frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I groaned and shook my head, frustrated with my inability to speak. I hated standing up for myself. “It’s not *you*. Or us. I’m just...” I exhaled deeply to settle myself down. “I just don’t want everyone I know to hate me.”

She leaned over and held me gently in her arms. Even though she was half my size, she had this way of making me feel safe. Secure. Wanted. She helped me so much after Ashley and I broke up and I know I had the same effect on her after what happened with Grace. There was this unspoken thanks between us for dragging each other out of the pit we’d thrown ourselves into.

“Nobody is going to hate you.”

“But what if they do?” I asked. “What if they find out and they hate us?”

She held me close and wouldn’t let go. I didn’t want her to. “They might not understand now,” she whispered, “and some of them may never understand, but that doesn’t mean there won’t be people who *will* later. They’ll see us and wish they were us. They’ll see two people who are happier than they’ve ever been and feel like shit because they don’t have what we do.”

She kissed me on the cheek and all my fears seemed to wash away. That’s all it took.

“I’ll never leave you.”

“I’ll never leave you either.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Beth

I had so much more I wanted to say. That was my one chance to speak up and tell the world to go fuck itself for being so heartless and cold. If there was ever going to be change and acceptance for people like me, it starts with young people. If I don't tell them just how fucked up everything is, nothing changes when it's our turn to run things. My generation is the most accepting in the history of the United States, maybe even the whole world, but it's still not enough.

Until I can stand up on stage holding hands with my girlfriend and not fear being humiliated by the biggest pieces of rancid shit that ever existed, it'll never be enough.

Lauren had such a good heart. She was always looking out for me and not just in regards to the content of the presentation. I can get carried away with being so upset over the smallest issues and she was always there to ground me. She was my own personal lightning rod. These last few months have been some of the best of my life. Me and her against the world. She made things so much better while I was dealing with everything, especially as Homecoming got closer and closer. I didn't want to go, but I wasn't leaving her home alone.

The only month worse for me was going to be May. I'll never be able to smile during May again.

I was so worried about how she would handle being considered my "rebound" after everything that went down. To my surprise, she really didn't seem to mind all that much. I guess this was because I could also be considered her "rebound" after her breakup with Ashley. They had only been broken up for a little bit before she and I hooked up. It was the same thing for me, but we never talk about that. I think she was afraid of what I had to say.

She completes me. She is sweet and caring and strong and independent, not to mention drop-dead gorgeous and smarter than most of the school.

This is why I believed without a shadow of a doubt that Lauren Bradshaw was going to do well as the new Student Body President of Arlington City High School. She is *good*. She would never let the power go to her head. Lord Acton could meet her and eat his fucking heart out. She would give all the money she had in her wallet to the lonely kid who got his lunch money stolen from out of his locker by one of the self-entitled popular girls and never expect to be repaid. She was different from that moron Spencer and his equally pathetic mentor Charles. Things will be different than they were under the yoke of the popular assholes who only sought to look out for each other and make everyone else look like fools.

Being by her side made me more proud than anything I have ever done before in my life. We were going to do great things together. Side-by-side. A united front. Me and her against the world for the rest of our lives. Just as it was meant to be. It was our destiny.

I just know it.

Ashley

I have to say, I was actually kind of impressed with Beth's speech.

The presentation was discussing what was going on around the world before and during the Civil War and how other countries reacted to it. Some people talked about the smuggling they did to get supplies past the Union blockade, others talked about how Canada became a final stop for escaped slaves running from the slave catchers on the Underground Railroad. Mine was supposed to be on how the Confederates wanted to invade Cuba and turn it into a slave state, but with everything going on I was allowed to have an extension and give the presentation a few days later. My History teacher was really cool about it. It was a little kindness and I desperately needed it.

Beth comes out and gives this massive speech on the ethics of a British politician trying to influence Parliament into invading the Union on behalf of the Confederates to help them win the war. Obviously I'd heard the *absolute power* line before, but I didn't know the history of it. Credit to her for actually looking into the story behind it.

What really impressed me, though, was how confident she was in her speech. She had no problems taking shots at the Confederacy, something that can really step on some fingers depending on who you talk to around here, and she had no issues standing up for women's rights and trans people and bashing asshole politicians who want them dead. I could tell our teacher was really uncomfortable with the whole thing. Gotta give her props for not caring who she pissed off.

She basically said everything I had ever said online with a username protecting my identity or in private with people I trusted more than anyone, which means Lauren and Michelle. I used to be terrified of talking politics with my friends, who could not give a shit, because I know a lot of their parents had different views than I do. I didn't want to lose my friends because their parents disagreed with my political views, which basically translate to not being an asshole to women, people in the community, or minorities. That's basically the only reason why I never come out to any of my closest friends. Not even Michelle.

I knew she'd probably get some flak for saying it, but I did respect her for doing it at all.

Kate

When everything was said and done, I wasn't shocked that Lauren became the President. Or even mad. It was the last thing anyone was talking about when the last bell rang. I felt kinda bad for Lauren because that should have been her moment. Nobody was talking about it, though.

I heard the rumors about a blowup between Spencer and O'Reilly around the same time as everyone else. Everybody was laughing about it, everybody was speculating on it. It basically ruined his reputation around school. Whatever was left of it, anyway.

It supposedly was about the fight at the football game and him accusing Brad of being a rapist. That was the story everyone went with based on a rumor from whoever was working as the student assistant in the front office that day. I think it was Jenny Schultz?

Somebody claimed they saw Ashley and Spencer together in the parking lot. Whoever was out there soon told everyone and for the second time that day, Ashley was left as the center of attention. Ashley didn't want to talk about it so we didn't learn much except that Spencer ran off and she tried to stop him. I couldn't blame her for wanting to keep it private.

In a perfect world, the guy who got beat up for attacking a would-be rapist would be treated like a hero and all but be handed the Presidency because he deserved it for standing up for Ashley. This is not a perfect world and nobody had seen Spencer in days.

Lauren acted surprised when she was declared the winner, though I wonder if this was a facade and she was just playing up the excitement for the people around her. Beth was convinced that Lauren would win and she was right. She told me that Lauren was extremely hesitant to even consider running when the idea came up over the summer, but I think she was just being modest and trying to make her girlfriend look humble.

It's Lauren Bradshaw. She had just as much of a chance of winning as Spencer did.

Was I still upset that I dropped out? A little. But things weren't all bad, I guess. Lauren followed through with her promise to bring me into her Cabinet when we talked after school was done for the day. So, at the very least, I could say I would at least be able to put *something* on my college apps. And I figured I could always try again if Lauren didn't want to do it Senior Year or maybe she would even be okay with some friendly competition. The last thing I wanted to do was drive a wedge between our new friendship after it only just begun so I wouldn't dream of asking her that so soon, especially since she'd only just won. But I would think about it.

Lauren, Beth, Michelle, Casey, Heather, and myself ended up going out to dinner after school was over. Ashley was still really worked up over Spencer storming out and needed a break. I was the fish out of water. All of those people were cool and popular and had a lot of friends and played sports and stuff. Even Beth, who was a bit of a loner, was more popular here than I ever was just because she was secretly dating Lauren and got to hang out with her crowd as a plus-one. I tried to stay quiet for most of the night just to not embarrass myself.

"I still can't believe I won," Michelle humbly bragged between bites of her chicken salad.

"You totally deserved it!" Lauren said sweetly. "If anyone else won, I'd probably just quit. You are *literally* the only one I'd work with. Ahh, this is going to be so much fun!"

Michelle was so happy to be working with her bestie. I don't know how she felt about Spencer and his crew of football players, but I can't imagine she would like being stuck with them for a half-hour every couple of days while they talk about guy stuff, even if she was dating one. Ashley told me stories of how they ran things during Sophomore year and it seemed like a nightmare. Now there were only a handful of athletes in the club and I figured Lauren and Beth could keep them in line. Not that Tom needs to be checked, though. He seemed really cool. Casey had been dating him for a year and said he was amazing.

"He's taking me to his grandma's house to meet her this Sunday," she gushed. Everyone *oohed* and *awed* in unanimous support for her. I caught Beth's gaze and she gave a little eye-roll at how silly it was. I smiled.

"Does anyone know the Freshmen who won?" Lauren asked.

"Natasha *Lopez*," Heather answered with annoyance. "My sister says she's a total bitch. She's a year older than her and she said she treated people like garbage back in middle school."

"Maybe she's grown up a little?" Lauren offered. Heather shrugged.

"I'm more worried about having a basketball player and a football player together," Beth said. "We all know what's going to happen this year. There's a big Anniversary this year."

"Has it really been fifteen years?" Casey asked.

Beth nodded her head. "And I *guarantee* something is going to go down."

"What is it with them?" Casey asked, annoyed. "Why do they have to make such a big deal over this *every. Single. Year?*"

Lauren smiled. "We can worry about that at the meeting tomorrow. For now, let's just relax and enjoy our win."

I still couldn't stop thinking about Tracy and what we almost did. If they didn't back out of the race, Lauren and Beth would have been the laughing stock of the entire school while everyone shared their pictures around behind their backs. They might have needed to change schools, maybe even move to different states. If I had listened to her, I might have been the one having the celebration dinner.

Just me and Tracy and...

Beth

From what I gathered after talking to some people online, other high schools would simply have elections to determine who would get the other Cabinet positions and the President would be stuck with complete strangers and wildcards for their subordinates. People would run for Secretary, Treasurer, and whatever else and that was that. Anyone who had no chance at becoming President would run for that and then get to party with the cool kids a couple times a week. I think it was like that back home, but I was too busy keeping my head down to pay attention to that stuff.

We were extremely fortunate to not have that inconvenience. Without it, we were allowed to recruit our own people to the jobs. This ensured a tight leash and some existing trust between the members. That was extremely important. Who would dare rock the boat and risk ruining a friendship by saying no to the people who gave them the job in the first place?

After having actually given the jobs away, I can see why actual politicians become such sellouts. They are given an inch and expect a mile in return.

This was why I made it my highest priority to convince Lauren to let me choose who I believed would be best suited for the Cabinet. I had a much sharper mind for diplomacy and politics and felt it was better to maintain total control over the situation. Lauren's friends aren't all the worst, namely Michelle, but she has a long way to go in terms of learning who she should associate herself with. Too many people in her life drag her down and hold her back from being the strong independent woman I fell in love with. She needed me to help sort the wheat from the chaff.

She agreed to let me make the decision for her on the condition that I bought her a box of donuts. I love that woman.

When it came down to deciding who would fill what positions from our list of allies, we decided to bring in friends and allies as well as people with political ties that we could exploit, which in the high school world translates to people with ties to the most important clubs, cliques, and teams. Having a couple of athletes win their elections as well as the likes of Victoria Falco, Jasmine Jackson, and Michelle Wilson, all very popular and intelligent girls with their own little groups of followers, saved us the need to go out and recruit them ourselves.

I took it upon myself to bring in the best and brightest for my girlfriend's administration. Hours spent combing through the school's website, old year books, and Facebook and Instagram pages to remember people I had forgotten and be introduced to people I had never met. In the end, I think I found a strong collective. The Avengers of Arlington. A true think tank made up of the finest untapped potential I could find among this cesspit of hormones and body spray.

Lauren Bradshaw's Cabinet **(Rough Draft)**

President: Lauren

Vice President: Myself (because who else would it be?)

Secretary: Katherine

Treasurer: X

Historian: Casey

Student Activities Advisor: Y

Student-Faculty Liaison: Z

Yeah, I didn't actually need to put much thought into this. That was a lie.

This was not exactly the Tammany Hall of highschool politics and I never expected it to be. There were jobs that needed doing and asses that needed kissed to keep people on Lauren's side and these were the ones that required the least amount of effort. If I wanted people who would give the "jobs" to the level of respect they deserved, I'd probably have been better off picking up the homeless guy under the bridge.

I had to make concessions in the name of actually getting things done. Also I remembered halfway through an all-nighter that I don't actually know ninety percent of the student body and of those ninety percent, eighty wouldn't actually say yes to a stranger asking them to sacrifice their days off working on dances and food drives. Of the ones that actually would say yes, most of them would only do it to either try to leech off of Lauren's popularity or try to weasel their way in between us.

Ah, well.

The bright side is most of these positions carry absolutely no responsibility. Without even setting foot in the Student Council Office, I knew the role of "Historian" was pointless. It was just another position added to give someone a morale boost and college application bonus. It was more or less the exact same thing as Secretary, a job we had already given to Katherine as a thank you for stopping Tracy, and really was expendable in the grand scheme of things. That was the only reason I gave the job to a total airhead Casey. She was dating Tom and I wanted to ensure his loyalty. I knew tensions would arise between him and Alex Weatherspoon, the basketball playing Sophomore Rep, so gaining Tom's support early on was vital.

Two votes are better than one, after all.

I considered adding Heather as well to ensure three votes, a move that would have been even more of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the legitimacy of our administration than pretty much anyone else in the entire school, but she thankfully declined because she said she needed to work on her SAT prep and focus on school. I almost snorted in her face at the thought of her in anything besides clown college. It was too funny of a concept for me to wrap my head around.

Tracy becoming a toxic growth in the eyes of my friend group made it all but impossible to secure her a spot, something I had intended from the beginning as she still owed me for not burying her like the little worm she was. Losing her was unfortunate, but you reap what you sow. She may hate me with a passion for standing up to her, but I was entirely justified. Hurting poor sweet Katherine was just cruel.

After dealing with the most useless of jobs, I decided to seek out special permission from Mr. Hardy to add two new positions to the Cabinet. In reality, I needed an excuse to get two more people in that I could trust. I met with him during my study hall the next day to discuss the matter. I spent all night coming up with an argument for each position I wished to create and what their role would be.

I cited the failure of the previous administration to prevent the incident at Prom as an utmost concern for more student-teacher correspondence, hence the creation of the “Student Activity Advisor” position. A position that I, as Vice President, would personally maintain oversight over. This person would be in charge of all dances, food drives, assemblies, etc. and they would meet with either Mr. Hardy or Mr. O’Reilly if needed to discuss details and plans on behalf of or alongside the President.

It really was just a formality as we already had a Homecoming, Snow Ball, and Prom Committee that consisted of multiple Class Representatives working together. This new position would serve as their immediate boss and prevented me and Lauren from needing to waste time deciding which streamers to hang up. It was all thankless busywork that nobody really wanted to do. All people cared about when it came to dances was hanging out with their significant other in public, getting drunk or high at a party, and maybe getting laid if they aren’t with total prudes.

Most importantly and above all else, though, we had someone to blame if things went horribly wrong.

With regards to the newly created position of “Student-Faculty Liaison,” I argued that recent events between the student body and the school required there to be more transparency between the kids and the adults. Citing the suicide of Grace Carlisle, I explained to Mr. Hardy that we needed to have someone who could speak to staff or administration on behalf of the student body if something of this nature ever came up again. Someone who could speak about big issues on behalf of other students and find out what would be done to help them. Someone both the administration *and* the student body at large could trust. A sort of ambassador-type.

Everyone knew Mr. Hardy was hurt by the death of one of his students and wasted no time accepting my proposal. He kept a small photo of her in the corner of his “Wall of Memories,” a large collage of pictures stapled to a massive bulletin board beside his whiteboard at the front of the room. It was nice to know she was still remembered.

Mr. Hardy generously approved my request and I was left with two additional jobs to fill alongside the position of Treasurer, which I had plans for that would require time and patience. After careful consideration, I came to the conclusion that Ashley was the best choice to serve in the role of Student Activity Advisor and sought her out during that same study hall period to ask her to join us.

Ashley looked like a wreck. Sure she was absolutely beautiful and all, but she looked like she aged twenty years in the span of a few weeks. The accident must have been keeping her up at night. Add in her drug habit and you could plainly see she was going off the rails.

“Why would you want me?” she asked me with great suspicion. I could not blame her for distrusting me. It was not like we hated each other or anything.

“Okay, she didn’t want me to say anything, but Lauren is *really* worried about you right now.” I took a step closer. She didn’t back away. “I am, too.”

I knew mentioning her beloved ex by name would soften her up just a bit and see reason. As predicted, she took the bait.

“Why?”

“After everything that happened and after we swore we would help you out and protect you, why do you think she wouldn’t want to be there for you? Especially now after what happened to Spencer. Do you think she just wants to hurt you or something?”

Ashley was at a loss for words. Now was the time to go in for the kill.

“She still loves you, you know,” I said, the admission stinging like one of those Japanese Murder Hornets. “As much as it pains me to admit it, I know she does. She worries about you all the time. I know it would mean a lot if you would be with her a little more often. She never told me about what happened between you two, but I can tell she wants to work things out. She really wants you to be okay, Ash.”

Ashley’s resolve was crushed. She had no fight left in her. The prospect of being loved is a cruel one, especially when it is by someone you already convinced yourself you would die for. All it took was one whiff of the concept of being desired and she was mine.

“I’ll be there.”

Lauren Bradshaw’s Cabinet **(Version 1.0)**

President: Lauren

Vice President: Myself

Secretary: Katherine

Treasurer: X

Historian: Casey

Student Activities Advisor: Ashley

Student-Faculty Liaison: Z

With Ashley’s loyalty and commitment to our cause ensured, I only had two more jobs to fill and our own little Small Council would be complete. That would be a matter for later, though. When the end of the day came, it was time for our first meeting of Student Council.

Ashley

I was in a rut. Weeks of being beaten down and having worse and worse things happen to me were finally starting to get to me. Like *really* get to me. I was waking up every twenty minutes at night, I couldn't focus on homework, I was ready to quit the cheerleading squad which would basically doom me to a life of sitting alone at lunch...

I was a mess. I knew I needed help, but I didn't know where to go.

Having no real friends sucks. Casey and Heather are sweet, but they can't have a serious conversation to save their lives. It was all boys and clothes and TV. Losing Michelle was killing me. She was the only real person I could confide in about anything, except maybe Lauren. I knew deep down that if I talked with her about why Lauren and I stopped being friends, she would understand. Hell, she'd probably go out of her way to try and set us up again. She was so cool like that. I couldn't bring myself to tell her. I was too scared.

Therapy was not an option either.

If I wanted to see a therapist, I'd need to talk to my mom since it was her insurance I'd be getting it through. If I talked to my Mom, she'd want to know *everything* before ever taking me to a session to see what she could do. Lauren, Brad, almost hooking up with Jason, my drug use.

Spencer...

Even though she loves me, I'd need a real reason to actually justify going to therapy versus just sitting down and talking with her. What did I have to be upset about that she couldn't just fix herself? She isn't a hover parent, but she would rather shoulder all of the burden. That's just how it's been since Dad left. It's not my fault I had nightmares for years about her and Dad getting divorced and now all of a sudden those nightmares are coming true.

I'm trapped in that pit inside my head that I can't crawl out of as my family is ripped apart. Alone. Suffering in silence. I felt like some edgy asshole from Tumblr or Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*. Just me against the world because the world kept trying to fuck me over and I was too scared to do anything about it.

I was wasting away a little more every day. I'd wake up in the morning before the alarm went off and just stare at the ceiling, remembering that I had to do another day. Part of me wished I could just die in my sleep. Go to bed and never wake up and have it be no fault of my own. I wouldn't need to be the one to do it and no one would think less of me for it. Hell, they'd probably see me as a martyr. They'd raid my room to find keepsakes that they could flaunt around like the scrunchie from Heathers as a token of just how much people loved me and missed me. The dumb fanfiction I wrote when I was a pimply eighth grader would be discovered and I'd be lauded as the second coming of Steinbeck who never knew her true potential. PDFs of the stories would go for thousands of dollars online. At least I'd have left *something* behind for people to remember me by.

Fuck, I'm such a narcissist.

Thinking about people actually caring about me in death made me hate myself more in life. I felt like an attention hog for wanting to be seen. Selfish. You got people starving in Africa

and suicide nets outside of factories in China and here I am sitting alone in the cafeteria in a suburban Texas high school during study hall wishing I could be anywhere else in the world. Why did I deserve to live in a country with plenty of food and shelter and be pretty and white and have everything handed to me since I was a baby? You've got cops killing people in the streets and trans people fighting for their right to exist and the Supreme Court about to take away access to legalized abortion and ban gay marriage and I get to go home and watch TV and eat ice cream and forget about life while the world burns outside my window.

What did I ever do to deserve to be happy?

At first, I honestly thought Beth was kidding when she asked me to join Student Council. I was minding my own business in study hall when she walked up to me and asked if we could talk. As much as I wanted to get my homework done before I went to the hospital, I just couldn't focus. She'd actually been kinda nice to me lately, another thing I didn't deserve after how badly I treated her last year. Letting her talk to me was the least I could do to repay her for putting up with me for no reason. I wasn't expecting her to give me a job offer.

"Lauren and I were wondering if you wanted to work with us and be on her Cabinet?" she asked with a sweet smile on her face.

I almost laughed in her face.

Again, I thought she was kidding and this was just another way of her fucking with me to get some of her dignity back after so much abuse. She really had grown a backbone since she first started here so I wouldn't put it past her.

"Why do you want *me*?"

When she told me that Lauren was still in love with me and wanted to work with me, I realized she was serious. It hurt to hear that she was so worried about me. Lauren and I had been broken up for months. She shouldn't still be worrying about me. She doesn't have a responsibility to look after me. It was just another thing that made me feel like shit about myself.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. She gave me a quick rundown. Even though I felt obligated to help them after all they'd done for me, I had to set some ground rules. "Just to be clear, I'm not doing all of your work for you like I did for the guys. I have too much going on to be someone else's butler."

She smiled. "I promise you won't be stuck doing *everything* for us. Kate will be there to help. And I'm working to get some of the best people I can find to work with us."

"And *I'm* one of the best?"

"You said it yourself, you did pretty much all of the work for Spencer when you were working for him. Wouldn't you like to at least get credit for what you do? The job I had in mind would be perfect for you and unlike before, you'd have people working *for you* instead of... whatever was going on before. And besides, I think the distraction would be good for you."

She went on to explain that she was creating an entirely new job called the "Student Activity Advisor" and it was pretty much everything it sounds like. I would be in charge of organizing school events with multiple people working for me. Instead of doing all of the work alone or being paired with people who weren't interested in actually working at all, I'd have

people answering to me and listening to what I asked them to do or else they'd have to answer to Lauren and Beth. More work for more individual recognition.

I have to admit, it was pretty tempting. And not just because I would be spending time with Lauren again.

Besides myself, Tracy was the only one who actually did anything in the group last year. Hell, she probably even did *more* than I did. I asked if she would be able to get a job to help me out, but Beth quickly shut that idea down.

"Let's just say that she wouldn't be a good fit with some of the people in the group."

I had an idea of who she meant and why they wouldn't work well together. I hoped Kate was doing okay. We hadn't talked much lately. I wondered when she found out what Spencer asked Tracy to do. I felt partially responsible for what happened. I could have forced Spencer to call it off, but I didn't. I was too angry and wanted to get away from everyone, especially him. It was one of many instances of me fucking up and it coming back around to hurt someone else.

She then told me some of the people I would be working with. It was nice to hear that she was giving Casey a spot. I wished Heather was available to help, but sadly her grandma was really sick and she wanted to spend more time with her while she's still here. I can't blame her for not wanting another thing to worry about. Casey and I would be more than capable of organizing Homecoming together, though.

"I'm in," I finally said firmly. "I'll see you later."

I was very curious who the last two people she wanted to recruit would be. I had a few ideas in mind, but Beth said she would take care of it so I kept my mouth shut. I was still processing that I was going to be back on student council again. It sucked that Spencer wouldn't be there, though. As much as he pissed me off sometimes. I just hoped he was okay...

It was going to be nice to spend more time with some of my friends. Kate, Michelle, Casey... and Lauren and Beth. I still felt like I was on shaky ground after everything that went down over the past year. Especially with Beth, who I knew still hated my guts even though she'd been making an effort to at least be cordial with me for Lauren's sake.

But if she was really trying to look past that and let bygones be bygones...

That was when I realized that this was a sign. A sign from the universe that was saying that I could make things right and be a better person. I was sick of feeling guilty for being such an asshole before and sick of feeling lost and confused and sad and like my life had no meaning. This wasn't going to become some big scheme to try and win Lauren back or anything. I realized this was my one chance to make myself a better person in the eyes of the people that go to this school. The same people who mocked me for being nothing but a bitch and a brat and a junkie behind my back when they thought I couldn't hear them. The ones I tried to impress by kissing Kara Alderman's ass for a whole year. The ones I would think about while lying awake at night ten years later while remembering how much of an ass I was, wondering if they remember.

If there was ever a chance to mend fences and become a good person, someone that could reflect on their day as they're trying to fall asleep and not feel like a total waste of life, this was it. And I was going to take it.